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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Power and Knowledge in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee

by

(C) Josephine Brenda Astley Dodd

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF Master of Arts

Department of English

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

Spring 1987

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ISBN 0-315-37689-9

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DEGREE FOR WHICH THESIS WAS PRESENTED Master of Arts

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled Power and Knowledge in the Fiction of J.M.Coetzee submitted by Josephine Brenda Astley Dodd in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

R J Merrett

Supervisor

Date 16th April 1987

Dedication

There are several people that I want to thank for their assistance with my contribution to the relative lack of scholarship on J.M. Coetzee. Their assistance has come in a variety of forms ranging from the easily identifiable (Craig McLuckie's generosity with hard-won references; Bev Tetz's salvaging of essays from waste paper) to the quasi-fabulous (Jennifer Baked Bean Kelly). John and Catrin Owen Wheelwright probably now know the meaning of the phrase "the writer's block" far better than they would have liked. They made a space for me to work in and were not perturbed to find it full of much confusion. Thankyou, you five. I couldn't have done it without your love and support. And the last person I want to thank is Andrew Evans without whose fiendish fingers most of this would not have reached print, and without whom I cannot do.

Abstract

The literature of a country such as South Africa is bound to be more closely examined for its political relevance than that of less explosive countries. The thematic readings of J.M. Coetzee's fiction reveal that if his work mounts a critique it is not a very subversive one. His texts have been readily reabsorbed into mainstream liberal/humanist discourse. This assimilation may, of course, be a function of the reading habits of his critics and reviewers. They overlook the fact that Coetzee has actually anticipated their reaction. They tacitly insist on continuous narrative and consistent characterization and evaluate Coetzee's works in terms of individual psychological development and ethical vision, applauding some of his novels yet rejecting others. Their readings are, in short, reductive. If one pays careful attention to Coetzee's fictional practice, however, one sees that he is attempting to undermine these assumptions. His formal disruptions and metafictional motifs foreground the fictionality of his works and the arbitrary nature of signs. Coetzee thus calls into question the ways we structure reality and exposes the working of ideology. The political usefulness of what Stephen Watson has called Coetzee's "deconstruction of realism and decolonization of language" has its limits however. His refusal to invest any narrative with more importance than the next is a deferral of moral choice. The ahistorical treatment of human interaction is a conservative gesture. The erudition required to recognize his intertextual references diminishes his potential audience. The political uses to which the reader can put Coetzee's observations about the construction of fiction (myth, ideology, etc.) are many and various. The ends to which they should be put cannot be inferred from his novels. His political silence remains ambiguous. In the South African context such silence seems irresponsible.

Acknowledgments

There are some people I have to thank here: Professor Gary Kelly, who first encouraged me to come to the University of Alberta and who runs a fine seminar; Professors Steve Arnold and Ron Ayling who sat on my committee; Professor Rob Merrett who supervised the production of my thesis and to whom I am indebted for his instructive criticism; and finally, Professor Paul Hjartarson who kindly agreed to act as chairman of my defence committee despite a very heavy schedule and who has been throughout my studies here an example of academic commitment and fairmindedness. Thankyou.

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I. Introduction

It is, or should be, impossible to read the works of a South African writer such as J.M. Coetzee without knowing that South Africa is in the middle of a civil war, and that the choices which the citizens of South Africa make on a day-to-day basis are imbued with a more intense political significance than those we, in less explosive situations, have to make. However, one must take into account that as a citizen of the Republic of South Africa, understood as including the Bantustans, one's potential for choice, for freedom of movement, for freedom of expression, is severely curtailed by the rules and regulations, tanks and guns, of the state apparatus which is protecting the interests of the White minority.

The regime's violent defence of its interests means that social practices, which at other times and in other places might be treated neutrally or allowed greater freedom, become problematic. Michael Vaughan argues that in such circumstances "practices that operate within the wider sense of politics tend to acquire an added intensity of 'political' reference, since they have to compensate for the repression of political activity in its most concentrated form" (119). He goes on to discuss literature as one of the social practices which functions in this "compensatory" way.

Questions about the function of literature and the responsibility of the writer have always been under discussion but perhaps never more urgently than in South Africa at the present time. The selection of statements on these issues presented below indicates the dominant attitudes in South Africa today. The first is Andre Brink discussing his reasons for returning to and remaining in South Africa:

> In fact, only by being not only in situation but, if at all possible <u>sur place</u>, can one make sure that the system is exposed, countered and eventually shattered: in the name of that truth that all writers go in search of, that freedom which can only be born from the rebellion against unfreedom, and that justice of which as a barefoot boy I caught a glimpse that can never fade--provided one commits oneself

> unconditionally to the need to state it, and restate it, and state it again, and again, and forever. (35)

Brink's decision to remain in South Africa is dictated by his commitment to change in the country; a commitment which informs his writing career. His statement testifies to the indivisibility of literary and political activity. The "glimpse that can never fade" of which he speaks is paralleled in Elsa Joubert's statement about her role as writer. Explaining the impact of the Sharpeville massacre on her career, she says:

> This brought things to a head in my writing. All other subjects seemed trivial and unacceptable. Limited as my capabilities were, I felt it vital. . . to 'bear witness'. (51)

This intense need to address social issues is shared by many writers. My last quotation is perhaps a definitive statement. It comes from the writer Mbulelo Mzamane:

> In South Africa, you are not just a critic, or a teacher. You are either an enemy or a supporter of the regime. . . . The situation allows for no prevarication, no literary quislings. Perhaps a time will come when we shall sit back and review one another's work primarily as literary creations. For now, we have very pressing problems to which we must harness all our resources, physical and spiritual. (304)

That literature functions to support or subvert, that the writer has a responsibility whether s/he likes it or not, seems to be the dominant attitude in South Africa. From there, the question is how to write, what kinds of writing best articulate an understanding of the political reality of South Africa, or best contribute to a change in its consciousness? For Elsa Joubert, it meant no longer setting her stories outside South Africa and no longer using allegory. For Mbulelo Mzamane, it meant developing the technique which he calls "collective characterization" and which is elsewhere called populist realism. Social realism is

the dominant mode of novelistic practice in South Africa today, and any literature which "bypasses social issues in order to discuss itself" (Marquard 19) is likely to be understood as literature which is not against the enemy and must in consequence be for it.

Such is the cultural context in which J.M. Coetzee produces his writing. For someone like Coetzee who writes novels which are highly self-referential and whose work is frequently understood as dehistoricized allegory, the climate of opinion about the commitment evidenced in his fictions is not likely to be favourable. The effect which his texts have on his reading public is an issue which he himself addressed in a personal interview with Dick Penner whilst lecturing in Kentucky; the following quotations are from Penner's transcript of their conversation:

> I seem to have two sets of critical public, one of which is in the United States. . . . The other is in South Africa. And the terms in which these two publics operate . . . are rather different. . . . On the one hand, the body of people in the United States read these books in the general terms in which books are read by intelligent, mainly academic type critics in the United States. Back in South Africa, there is another type of framework in which they are read, which is very heavily influenced by Marxism, by general Third World thinking. . . . The primary question . . . is, "Where does this book fit into the political struggle?" It is sort of a dominating question there. Those are actually the people I live among. I don't want to disparage them at all . . . they are serious, intelligent people, but they are reading my books in a particular way. (34)

Coetzee's comments on the two publics are worthy of closer examination and I will be dealing with the implications of his attitude in my conclusion. What should be stressed now is that he sets up oppositions between ways of understanding his works, between the general and the particular, between the

academic and the political. His method suggests further oppositions between the objective and the subjective, the neutral and the partisan; in the terms in which he is discussing attitudes to literature, the audience best equipped to understand his novelistic technique (he has described it elsewhere as radical formalism) is one which appreciates form and will not attempt to rifle through his text for political content. And he is right to imply that those he might call ideological critics who are preoccupied by the question "Where does it fit?" do not get much out of his novels; some of the most damning criticism of his work has come from students and radicals.

The widely held belief, to which Coetzee alludes, is that a novelist's preoccupation with form and style makes him aestheticist and apolitical because political relevance is to be found in a novel's content. Hence, realism is privileged by South African writers and critics because the verisimilitude of the novel's political setting makes it easy for the reader to recognize his/her reality and to draw conclusions about the authorial message. It is, however, too simple to leave the discussion of Coetzee's novels' potential contribution to progress in South Africa at the point where it breaks down into the old wrangle about form over content or content over form. It is inadequate to assume that the only way a writer can be relevant is by writing realist fiction. Indeed, critics such as Vaughan have argued that realism constitutes a negligible weapon in ideological terms because of its shared assumptions with liberal humanism.

Coetzee's rejection of realism as a mode of writing could mean that he is trying to escape political involvement by retreating into avant-garde aestheticism, but only if one accepts the form/content division. I am starting from the premise that all cultural activity is inherently political. I intend to reject the form/content division and will be exploring the possibility that Coetzee's fictional practice, his experimentation with form, contains more in terms of ideological critique than critics have hitherto suggested. My thesis is that, at the level of content, Coetzee's

works do participate in political debate, dealing as they do with colonization, identity, survival, consciousness and conscience, and that thematic readings yield insights which can be instructive and subversive: the form in which these themes are presented, however, is as much the "content" of his fictions as the overt content and any discussion of the potential challenge mounted by Coetzee has to take into account the "formal radicalism" of his works. I intend in this essay to examine first the thematic readings of Coetzee's work in order to demonstrate that they are reductive. These readings universalize the interaction between man and nature, and man and society, assimilating Coetzee's fiction into liberal discourse. Readings which incorporate a greater awareness of his formal innovations and narrative techniques reveal that he has anticipated conventional interpretive strategies and is attempting to subvert them. My analysis will look at the implications of his formal and theoretical premises and question the political usefulness of his novelistic practice. It is only after an examination of Coetzee's writing strategies that one can establish his position in the South African context and the potential in his work for contribution to change.

II. Thematic Readings, Critical Assumptions, Conservative Assimilations

Any inquiry into the potential of a novelist's work for contributing to political debate has, of necessity, to take into account that work's critical reception. In this chapter I will be outlining the dominant themes in J.M. Coetzee's fiction and assessing the critical reaction to it, using both scholarly articles and newspaper and magazine reviews. My reason for doing so is this: the ways in which texts are assimilated by or gain popularity among the reading public(s) indicate dominant modes of interpretation. An analysis of the interpretive strategies of Coetzee's public(s) reveals their textual and cultural assumptions; assumptions which, as I will argue in Chapter 2, he has anticipated and attempted to subvert. I will evaluate the extent of his success in this attempt in my final chapter.

The two themes which invite the most attention in Coetzee's fiction are power and identity. "J.M. Coetzee's vision goes right to the nerve centre of being" states Nadine Gordimer on the dust jacket of the Penguin edition of Waiting for the Barbarians. The way in which "being" is constituted and how "being" connects with power are the major thematic foci in all his texts. The central characters in his canon are all concerned with the question of how to be, what choices their particular contexts allow, or force upon, them. His fictional worlds, the characters' particular contexts, vary from the relatively recognizable (South Africa in its revolutionary phase in Life and Times of Michael K, the Karoo farm in In the Heart of the Country) to the quasi-fabulous (the ahistorical outpost of Waiting for the Barbarians, the desert island of Foe). Within each setting, the characters live out their existences in communities which vary in size from the minimal (Cruso's island, Magda's farm, Jacobus Coetzee's Namibia) to the maximal (Eugene Dawn's America, Michael K's South Africa). Yet within each community the same drama is being played out, within each setting the same questions recur: what does a wo/man need in order to constitute an identity? can a wo/man have an identity if s/he is removed from contact with other humans? In as microcosmic a community

as one comprised of only two people, can s/he escape the Master/Slave dialectic? As the community grows and roles diversify, how does one choose and maintain one's position? Do communities act as macrocosmic versions of the interplay between two people? Is it an imperative that a community's identity is only maintained by the forcible creation of the other, the Barbarians? What legitimating mythologies are propounded by Empire in order to justify the subjugation of its neighbours? How do we conceive of Civilization if its methods of self-constitution demand acts as barbarous as those attributed to its enemies?

Most of Coetzee's narratives use as their focalizer a character who belongs to, yet is functioning on the periphery of, the Master class. In his first text Dusklands, Coetzee counterposes the narratives of two such characters: Eugene Dawn appears as a functionary caught in a larger web, using his intelligence in the service of Empire, Jacobus Coetzee as the great White Hunter/Explorer who yields to violence after his humiliation in the wild. Both of them offer highly sophisticated discourses on their motives and assume that they have autonomy, and an immunity to the ideology of their societies. Both, however, appear ignorant of the ways in which they reproduce their societies' violence. Both narratives expose the intellect as ignorant of its limitations. In interview Coetzee agreed with Stephen Watson that the idea prevailing in both Dusklands and In the Heart of the Country is one of a:

> limitless power in a land so lawless that everything is permissible, but a power which becomes a source of despair because it so absolute and without opposition, and hence perhaps prevents that relation between men out of which reality is composed. (Speak 23)

Magda in In the Heart of the Country and Cruso in Foe are similarly of the Master Class yet are not "free" in Watson's sense to exercise absolute power. Magda is limited by her role in her relationships both with her father and with her servants; Cruso by the fact of being shipwrecked (i.e. it is not a location he

"chooses"). Both characters, however, are the Masters in their microcosmic communities, if only for a while, and both narratives examine the ways in which they perceive themselves and relate to others. Both characters attempt to escape the role of Master, Magda in her fumbling gestures of goodwill towards Hendrik and Anna, Cruso in his reluctance to dominate Friday and Susan Barton. The attempts of both Magda and Cruso are largely failures.

Waiting for the Barbarians and Life and Times of Michael K explore the dynamics of power from a different angle. The Magistrate and Michael K do not attempt to exercise limitless power in the manner of Jacobus Coetzee, nor do they attempt consciously and continually to escape the Master/Slave dynamic. They are more subject to the demands of their society than Magda and Cruso. Both figure as little men trapped in turbulent times, caught in the crossfire between forces to which they do not properly belong. Of course, this is somewhat to load the dice. Michael K is certainly not the Magistrate, and does not have the Magistrate's potential for choice. Yet this fact is one which has been downplayed in criticism, both characters having been understood as Everyman figures in modern day allegory.

The amount of critical attention that the various novels have received suggests that there is an impulse to accept the allegory in which the Everyman figure is easily recognizable (the Magistrate as a civilized, liberal, peace-loving, sympathetic, white man). There seems to be a spectrum of appreciation dictated by terms of accessibilty with Waiting for the Barbarians and Life and Times of Michael K at the most popular end, Foe and Dusklands somewhere in the middle, and In the Heart of the Country at the other end. The reviewers of Coetzee's novels seek to understand the Magistrate but not Magda. The impulse seems to be to justify the one most like us. (I am using the word "us" here in an ironic sense.) George Steiner criticizes Waiting for the Barbarians for being "Unfortunately heavy with cliches." It does not seem to have occurred to him to consider that this might be a deliberate strategy on Coetzee's part in order to point out the bankruptcy of

the lies that Empire tells itself.

Steiner is not alone in the assumption that Coetzee's fiction is easily interpreted and that his novels are flawed by easy clues. Also speaking of Waiting for the Barbarians, Nicholas Shrimpton in the New Statesman remarks that:

> events can be read either as a retrospective account of the end of Empire in Mozambique or Zimbabwe, or as a covert prophecy for the future of South Africa itself. Once the penny's dropped, of course, historical allegory of this kind can seem a little dull--a matter of ticking off fictional events against their literal counterparts. (30)

As if all liberation wars follow the same progression, and that is all there is to the novel. Cynthia Ozick is similarly dissatisfied with Life and Times of Michael K for being too easy to read. Commenting on the function of the medical officer she says, "he thickens the clear tongue of the novel by naming its 'message' and thumping out ironies" (26). She does not stop to consider whether the medical officer's interpretation is inserted ironically. Instead, she interprets the text as some sort of justification for constructive engagement--"the noble endurances and passionate revelations are not to be taken for a covert defence of terrorism" nor is the text "about the inevitability of guerilla war and revolution" (27).

The self-reflexive elements of Coetzee's fiction, which I shall discuss in my next chapter, should make critics wary of taking the characters' pronouncements at face value, and wary also of assuming that the message is easily extractable. Part of Coetzee's project is to point out that interpretation is ideologically determined. In the following pages I intend to examine in detail the critical material on Waiting for the Barbarians and In the Heart of the Country. The two texts are interesting to juxtapose because of their very different critical reception. Waiting for the Barbarians is the novel for which Coetzee gained international acclaim. I would argue that it gained such recognition precisely because it is the easiest of his novels to naturalize as a political allegory. Controversy rages over the particularity

or universality of its reference, yet most of its reviewers seem comfortable with the idea that it deals with political issues in South Africa.

Waiting for the Barbarians tells the story of an aging Magistrate in an unspecified outpost settlement of an unspecified Empire. The Magistrate's authority is usurped by the arrival of Colonel Joll from the capital. Suspecting incursions, Joll and his men are in search of barbarians who will provide them with information. Through his dealings with Joll, the Magistrate is forced to recognize his former complicity with the regime and to acknowledge the limitations of his heroic stand against his totalitarian masters. Thematically, and quite literally, the Magistrate is a tortured liberal.

Although Coetzee has stated that he "wanted to create characters and a setting that belong to no contemporary situations" (Smolowe 72), it is impossible to believe that for a writer as self-conscious as Coetzee the echoes of South Africa to be found in the text are accidental. Images such as women carrying washbaskets on their heads (4) and words such as "communal lands" and "border" (2) allude to Southern Africa. The fact that the lake is becoming more saline and before long the inhabitants of the settlement will be unable to exist independently of external supplies would remind an informed South African reader of the depletion of resources in the Bantustans and the existence of salt pans in Namibia. Comments made by the townsfolk in the novel, such as "Why can't they leave us alone? They have their own territories, haven't they?" (99), parallel the self-justificatory rhetoric of the white South Africans wishing to retain control of 80% of the land.

The most potent allusion to contemporary South Africa is in the word "border." The protection of the South African border against incursions by "communists" from Angola is a cornerstone in the Nationalist Party rhetoric. The government promoted paranoia about the "commies over the border" serves to divert attention away from the fact of the civil war raging within that border. Perhaps in South Africa today it is no longer so easy to remain ignorant of this fact.

However, the effectiveness of this enabling mythology at the time of Waiting for the Barbarians's writing was considerable.

Given that the physical border of South West Africa is something of a red herring for South Africans of both the right and the left, we should perhaps not pursue the oblique allusions to the potential geographical location of J.M. Coetzee's fictional border too far. The border therefore becomes a physical analogue for the interface of two opposing forces. These forces have been variously interpreted, and there seems to be greater ease on the part of critics and reviewers with defining Empire than with defining its opposite. Paul Ableman in the Spectator offers several levels of abstraction for our consideration: firstly, the Empire is any empire and "the book would communicate to Russian field commanders in Afghanistan just as it would have carried a message for British proconsuls, Roman provincial governors or American cavalrymen subjugating the Indians" (21); or secondly, Empire is "contemporary Western Man, basking in plenty and technological ease in a world which he has himself seeded with doomsday machines"; thirdly, "the Empire is the human mind, ordered, prosperous and fecund, but surrounded by the barbarous forces of madness and hallucination"; last, (and most ridiculously) it represents "the ageless ambiguity of things" which "dissolves all clear-cut moral judgements." Ableman deserves some credit for trying to see beyond one level of abstraction, or one analogue alone. He does, however, fall into the trap of allowing his multiple layering to dissolve clear-cut thinking on what else the barbarians might stand for.

Others, notably Menan du Plessis and George Steiner, have interpreted Waiting for the Barbarians as an analysis of the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic and these two offer quite different accounts of how this opposition functions in Coetzee's text. Du Plessis investigates the novel as a possible critique of this dialectic whereas Steiner happily accepts the novel as a reproduction of it. Menan du Plessis regards this novel as working through forms of the Hegelian dialectic and

states that "the great cunning of the barbarians lies in their refusal to enter into this combat" (83). When Joll and his henchmen are leaving the outpost after their failed mission, the Magistrate forces one of the men to explain what happened. He says:

> We froze in the mountains! We starved in the desert! Why did no-one tell us it would be like that? We were not beaten--they led us out into the desert and then they vanished! . . . They lured us on and on, we could never catch them. . . . They would not stand up to us (Waiting for the Barbarians 147)

If it is only through the negation of another human 'I' that being can be created, the barbarians frustrate the needs of Joll and the Third Bureau by their refusal to engage in a combat which could lead to their destruction. Cavafy's poem which provides the novel with its title supports this claim:

> Because it is night and the barbarians have not come
> And some people just in from the border say
> There are no barbarians any longer
>
> Now what's going to happen to us without them?
> The barbarians were a kind of solution. (Keeley and Sherrard 6)

Du Plessis suggests that the Magistrate is one of Hegel's pseudo-masters--a slave without a master, a master without a slave. There is consensus among commentators on this novel: the Magistrate is a figure who attempts to escape the Master/Slave opposition. The extent to which this is a conscious choice, or indeed possible, is much debated. Du Plessis is rather vague on this issue: "If his particular mode of perception results in a partially limited vision, it nonetheless makes other worthwhile things possible" (81). What these worthwhile things are remains unclear, for she leaves off her discussion with the comment that "what Coetzee is reflecting here is the ghastly stasis that our post-bourgeois society seems

to be floundering in" (87). Stephen Watson is similarly pessimistic about the possibility of escape. His favourite phrase, borrowed from Albert Memmi, "the colonizer who refuses," is applied to the Magistrate and the conclusion is gloomy: "He cannot help suffering from guilt and anguish and also, eventually, bad faith. He is always on the fringe of temptation and shame, and is, in the final analysis, guilty" (379).

Watson draws on Arthur Koestler's remarks about the predicament of the intelligentsia in a colonial situation: to be in such a position is

> to be deprived of responsibility while continuing to feel a responsibility which is as boundless in its guilt and as all-pervasive as those neuroses that breed so easily in the psychological closed-circuit of any great impasse. (382)

Watson suggests this as the position Coetzee finds himself in as a writer. It is true that this is the position that the Magistrate finds himself in in the fictional world of Waiting for the Barbarians, although it is a perhaps a little hasty of Watson (and many of Coetzee's other critics) to conflate the writer with his creation. (I will show in Chapter 3 that Coetzee has never acknowledged the need to "bear witness" as other writers have.) In fact, if anything Waiting for the Barbarians seems to be examining the Magistrate's reluctance to "bear witness," his longing for "a quiet life in quiet times" (8). The Magistrate is swept along by events more than he is prompted by his conscience. He presents himself as the quintessential liberal at the opening of the novel: "I believe in peace, perhaps peace at any price" (1-4), yet his narrative reveals his complicity with Empire. As a functionary it is his job "to collect all the tithes and taxes, administer the communal lands [and] preside over the law court twice a week" (8). He is not neutral because he ensures the Empire's rule. He not only downplays this fact, he also suppresses his awareness of how he subscribes to its ideology. A reformist at best, he does not believe in change. He sees the inhabitants as peasants, incapable

of self-determination, and is sure that if he retired from public life he would be replaced and nothing would have changed (139). His covert racism is revealed when he admits to finding the Barbarian girl ugly and assumes that, if they took control, the Barbarians would wipe their backsides on the town archives (143). His vision of the future ranges from the bleak to the apocalyptic. Nowhere does he show faith in progress or in peaceful, non-exploitative co-existence.

However, this denuding process whereby the unexamined contradictions in the Magistrate's liberal humanism become apparent has frequently been overlooked. For a critic like Dick Penner, "the core of Coetzee's novel is the Magistrate's evolving ethical awareness" (41) and the epiphanic moments for the Magistrate are identified by statements such as "I should never have allowed the gates of the city to be opened to people who assert that there are higher considerations than those of decency" (81). Many reviewers have agreed that the core of the novel is its "ethical vision" and that in this the novel belongs to a tradition of political allegory which includes The Plague and Darkness at Noon. The good liberal conclusions that inform Koestler's fiction, which he spelled out in his essay "The God that Failed," parallel the Magistrate's own conclusions:

> The lessons taught by this kind of experience, when put into words, always appear under the dowdy guise of perennial commonplaces: that man is a reality, mankind an abstraction; . . . that the end justifies the means only within very narrow limits; that ethics is not a function of social utility, and charity not a petty-bourgeois sentiment but the gravitational force which keeps civilization in its orbit. (60)

These are worthy conclusions perhaps, but they do not constitute much of a challenge to the reader's conception of reality. The potentially subversive or radical impact of the book is nullified because critics and reviewers can come away feeling that the Magistrate endorses their own political/philosophical assumptions. The contradictions between the Magistrate's professed beliefs and his modus operandi are

ignored and the novel is subsumed into bourgeois culture as a further justification for inactivity in the face of fascism. In the New York Times Book Review, Irving Howe has this to say, "Not that he (the Magistrate) becomes a critic of imperialism or a romantic defender of barbarians. . . . Weak, guilty, perhaps obsolete, he is at least human." Being "human" allows people such as the Magistrate to be "weak" and "guilty." In fact Howe is wrong because a romantic defender is precisely what the Magistrate does become. His last-ditch stand against imperialism is individual heroism, and as such, is doomed to failure. Joll has the Magistrate's measure when he taunts him with conceiving of himself as the "One Just Man." Howe overlooks this. John Mellors' remarks in the Listener are similarly complacent: "the author's evident anger and pity are not allowed to turn a subtle work of the imagination into a political pamphlet" (621). He does not allow that a vision of liberation from imperialism is a work of the imagination nor that the inaction he feels the novel endorses is a political stance. Another critic reluctant to look for more than he expects to find is The Times Literary Supplement reviewer, Peter Lewis: "J.M. Coetzee is too intelligent a novelist to cater for moralistic voyeurs." It is sad to note the way in which most critics and reviewers choose to ignore the awkward and implicating details. Ableman seems unaware of the irony in his observation that:

> The different elements in the population coexist peaceably. These include the townsmen, the fishing people . . . and even the remote nomadic barbarians who graze their flocks beyond the law. Into this prelapsarian paradise rides Colonel Joll. (21: emphasis mine)

One wonders if the dispossessed inhabitants of the squatter camps would read it that way, or would point out this observation made by the Magistrate:

> Easier to lay my head on the block than to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians: for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the gates of the town to the people whose land

we have raped? (108)

One has to question the ability of Waiting for the Barbarians to promote any kind of change in consciousness at all when it is possible for a critic like George Steiner to come out with remarks like the following one which closes his review in the New Yorker:

> With the death of the master there may come as well the extinction of a primordial bond, very nearly a strange kind of love. It is in his subtle inference of this love, and of the waste that may come of liberation, that Mr.Coetzee is at his best. (103: emphasis mine)

Steiner treats the exploitative relationship between Master and Slave as "primordial" and therefore natural and healthy. This, coupled with his seeming doubt that the liberation struggle can yield any positive results, enables his remarks to be used in the service of fascist politics.

The same complacency can be seen in the criticism of Coetzee's earlier novel In the Heart of the Country which was not even published in paperback until after the success of Waiting for the Barbarians. A look at the novel's publication and review history suggests that it has been taken seriously not as a literary work but as a commercial venture. Given that it is the narrative of a woman living in the middle of nowhere, its marginalization is very interesting. It seems that the arbiters of literary worth have greater resources for dealing with an account of a tortured liberal civil servant than the highly self-conscious monologue of Magda. After a brief synopsis of the text's publication details, I intend to examine the reviews of In the Heart of the Country in order to establish a framework of ideological and textual assumptions that may account for the text's marginalization. In Chapter 2, I will argue that an alternative reading is possible if one takes into account the formal innovation of the novel.

Sections 85-94 appeared in the South African literary journal Standpunte in 1976 before Ravan Press, Johannesburg published it in its entirety. There is no

mention of this edition in the Penguin edition, neither is there any mention of the fact that in the Ravan Press edition, the conversations in the text are conducted in Afrikaans. In 1976, Nadine Gordimer tried to interest her British publishers in accepting it, but they declined. In 1977 it won the prestigious CNA award in South Africa, and was published in Britain by Secker and Warburg, and in America under the title of From the Heart of the Country by Harper and Row. Whatever the merits the CNA judges recognized in it appear not to have been recognized by the international press--or at least by those major arbiters of taste in the English speaking world, the critics in Britain and America. In neither country did the novel cause much of a stir and the book did not appear in Penguin paperback until 1982, by which time Waiting for the Barbarians had won at least three major awards.

In the Heart of the Country received attention from the press in two phases, the first being when the novel was printed in hardback and the second when it was reprinted after Waiting for the Barbarians. In its first phase, it was reviewed by the major newspapers and periodicals. During the second, it received considerably fewer reviews in its own right, being cursorily referred to in the rash of reviews of Waiting. Publishers Weekly was amongst the first to review it in April 1977:

> This is a novel about South Africa. Not unexpectedly, therefore, it is a book about race. It is also a novel about fantasy. The pivot on which everything turns is internal dialogue. What is fiction? What is truth? As Magda, sheep farmer's daughter, sees it, truth lies in her diary, where she goes in for entries that are long, tedious, vituperative and boring. Endless ramblings and dissertations on why she has entered into a ménage à trois with her foreman and his wife leave one unimpressed with the momentum of her madness. Magda is after revenge because her father has already found sexual satisfaction in the arms of the foreman's black

> bride. There is little plot, less purpose and much confusion here. The style is ponderous and oppressive, even clumsy. (73)

The review starts from the premise that it is not about Magda, the narrator, but about South Africa today. The problem with the text that Publishers Weekly reads is that Magda interrupts the smooth transition of information about South Africa from the "Real World" behind the text to the interested reader. We cannot trust her account because "as Magda sees it, truth lies in her diary," not in some empirically demonstrable reality. She does not even present a convincing picture of madness because she supplies "dissertations" on her behaviour.

There are several problems with this review, and the "confusion" the reviewer identifies is largely of his own making. Magda never says that she is writing a diary. It is true that she describes herself very early as "a spinster with a locked diary" (In the Heart of the Country 3), but the text ends with her remark about the "space echoing with hymns I could have written but did not because (I thought) it was too easy" (139). The assumption that the text is a diary in spite of the lack of evidence is not as disturbing as the assumption that she is definitely mad and that the reasons for her madness are easily identifiable: "Magda is after revenge because. . . . " Here we see in action the contentment of the critic to invoke the self-evident. As Barthes remarks, "What is self-evident, what follows of itself, the 'natural' is in short, the ultimate outrage" (Barthes by Barthes 85). Without considering the issue of madness in any depth, Publishers Weekly casts off the novel as "confused," "rambling," and "unimpressive." Without any connection being made between the "oppressiveness" of the style and the oppression in the society in which Magda lives, Magda's narrative is dismissed.

The Observer's review of August 1977 is a more succinct version of the same refusal to engage with the idea that Magda is the focus of the novel:

> Watched by his shrivelled, brooding daughter, a Boer widower commandeers his black foreman's child bride for his bed. Something cracks, a rifle

> shot or the spinster's sanity, in this powerful, morbid study of lust, degradation and fantasy. (29)

Again, Magda is decentred. The review implies it is the father's actions which are the subject of the novel. Magda does not even get named in this review, she is a mere spinster whose sanity cracks.

Paddy Kitchen's review in The Listener is interestingly entitled "Death in the Head." He overcomes his unease "about novels which dispense freely with the attention keepers of place, time and specific narrative" in order to praise In the Heart highly. His review seems to be one of the more insightful of those that appeared in 1977, although he, too, is unable to resist the taming of the text: "her mother is dead, her father embarking on a late, and, in the event, unsuccessful courtship. Envisaging that it might be successful, she murders both him and his voluptuous bride in her mind" (223). Although Kitchen does his best to allow the narrative to remain discontinuous, nevertheless the above example is evidence of the attitude implicit in the first quotation from his article: narrative should be continuous, should make explicit the importance of each one of its various levels, and should indicate what is to be taken as merely imaginary and what as absolutely factual. Kitchen is unwilling, finally, to allow Magda the freedom of her own narrative. He not only ascribes reasons for the "mind murder" (the potential success of the father's relationship with the bride), without any supporting evidence but also describes the ending thus: "she remains inseparable from the landscape, a mad witch-woman spelling out messages in stone." He does not account for the fact that the last eight fragments do not mention the stone messages at all.

The same mistake about the ending of the novel is made by Anatole Broyard in the New York Times Book Review. He ends his significantly titled review "Hysteria, Scatology, Murder" with the image of Magda's stone ideogram, the white-washed woman with open legs. Ignoring the potential for reading rape

fantasy as a white-wash, he describes Coetzee as a "master of deft hysteria" (14). Hysteria, as we know, is commonly supposed to be an exclusively female complaint. He suggests that "Her life is filled with the wrong kind of love; she can love only her rage, her 'jagged virginity'." He does not inquire as to the cause of her rage nor the reason she would describe her virginity as "jagged." Nor does he suggest what the "right" kind of love might be. Nor does he examine the fact that her interactions with Hendrik, Anna, Anna, Jakob and her father are circumscribed by such deeply entrenched social and sexual taboos that any expression of "love," in whatever sense Broyard understands it, is liable to incomprehension, distortion and punishment.

Possibly one of the most brutal forcings of meaning onto Magda's narrative is Tom Paulin's in Encounter. Paulin states that this "diary-novel is less an exploration of the mind of a tormented spinster on a remote South African farm than a strict and penetrating intellectual meditation on the nature of history" (88). Paulin sets up an opposition between "spinster's mind" and "intellectual meditation," the latter in some sense deriving from Coetzee rather than Magda. The spinster's mind is, by implication, incapable of "intellectual meditation;" spinsters are "tormented" but only intellectuals are penetrating. Magda is hoist with her own petard according to Paulin, as she describes herself as an "angry spinster in the middle of nowhere." He continues:

> When she does act (or fantasise action) by murdering her father's new wife and then her father there is no sense of liberation--instead, we have to read her action symbolically as a prophetic account of the historical destiny of South Africa. Coetzee's analysis can be roughly translated like this: white South Africa has released itself from history; it is a static society which has sought to preserve itself by becoming a lonely castaway, a fixed and introverted state which is utterly incapable of bending to that developing process which is history. (88: emphasis mine)

The issue of liberation is more complex than he suggests. The point here is that there is only one reason why Paulin insists on the distinction between Magda's voice and Coetzee's meaning: he does not want to accept that Magda is capable of making these observations herself. This is the reverse process from the one we can see at work in most of the criticism of Waiting for the Barbarians where Coetzee is equated with the Magistrate. Although Paulin quotes Magda as saying "We are the castaways of history. That is the origin of our feeling of solitude," he would rather not see her as a competent spokesperson for her society. She is instead an "embodiment," a "symbol." He closes his review with another quotation from Magda's narrative and follows it up with another example of shifting the locus of "meaning" from narrator to author:

> "Lyric is my medium, not chronicle." And so In the Heart of the Country is an intellectual lyric which sings the absence of history, the electric lull before history breaks, rather than a chronicle of a frustrated woman's life--on the level of individual psychology the story is unconvincing, but as a piece of cultural psychoanalysis and diagnosis, it's glitteringly precise. (89: emphasis mine).

The individual psychology, Magda, is only important in so far as she acts as a mirror for South Africa. She is transparent. That her "frustrated woman's life" may be a product of that culture is obviously of no interest to Paulin.

My last examples should prove conclusively that Magda's story, Magda's life, Magda's psychology, Magda's text have been totally reinterpreted for the sake of consumption. Charles Larson in World Literature Today states:

> Patricide, rape, incest and miscegenation are not exactly unexplored themes in South African writing, though rarely have they been treated as hauntingly as in Coetzee's novel. The unnamed heroine's "monologue of the self" (as she refers to her tale) recapitulates her violent murder of her white father out of jealousy for his affair with his African

workman's wife. (245: emphasis mine)

He concludes with:

> At the end of the narrative the author suggests that the entire story may have been the fantasy of a deranged consciousness. Possibly none of these events ever happened but are only the troubled fantasies of a middle aged spinster bored with her mundane existence on the veld. (246: emphasis mine)

Like Paulin, Larson insists on separating the "author" from the "deranged consciousness." He sees no need to account for his automatic conflation of bored "middle aged spinster" and "deranged consciousness."

The reviewers showed no inclination to change their position in 1982 when the paperback came out. Publishers Weekly mentions Waiting for the Barbarians first, ignores Magda's name and repeats its earlier pronouncement of "little plot, less purpose and much confusion here" (70). The New York Times Book Review similarly points out that the author is the same as that of Waiting, gives a one line synopsis of plot including "loneliness, anger and eventual madness." It provides a rehash of Irving Howe's aside whilst reviewing Waiting as "a study of social and sexual entanglements between whites and blacks that showed patches of high talent but finally broke down under the weight of an overwrought Faulknerian prose" (35).

As I have tried to demonstrate, the reviews share some basic assumptions about the text which deserve serious attention. First, that there is an "I" behind the text, prior to the mediation of the diary and that this "I" is mad; second, that the character Magda goes mad for reasons which we can easily discover; third, that the character is subordinate to, not constitutive of, the author's message; fourth, that the real locus of meaning is theme not form (or the two combined); fifth, that the important theme is not the life of a bored spinster but apartheid/politics/history/lust/repression etc. These assumptions buy into realist

fictional technique and mainstream twentieth-century models of interpretation in the same way that the critics of Waiting for the Barbarians do. Therefore it is not surprising that many found the novel "perplexing," nor that the novel should have been marginalized.

The kinds of assumptions outlined above do not enable any understanding of Magda's narrative, yet when applied to the Magistrate's narrative, they yield different results. The Magistrate's narrative retains enough of the stylistic features required to allow for Waiting for the Barbarians's admittance to the grand canon of political allegory. Magda's, however, is in the tradition of stream-of-deranged-consciousness that few wish to pursue. As demonstrated above, Magda's text has been naturalized in ways which have led to her/its dismissal. Perhaps the definition of naturalization is instructive here. In the literary sense, "'Naturalization' emphasizes the fact that the strange or deviant is brought within a discursive order and thus made to seem natural" (Culler 137). In its legal sense, it is "the granting of full citizenship to one of foreign birth." Magda is strange, deviant and foreign because she is an unmarried, repressed South African. These are the implicit assumptions of the critics. But the significance of being unmarried or the concept of being repressed or the foreigness of South Africans are all constructs of the critics' making. Their criticisms do not take account of the complexity of the issues involved nor the sophistication of the form. In their readings, they are insistently reductive. It is interesting to note that the critics are either male or anonymous. By naturalizing Magda's narrative as "really" being about her father or South Africa or politics and so on, the critic disallows Magda's difference, renders her Other and confirms his sense of Self. Criticism of this nature must be seen for what it is: an imperialist activity.

Culler states that naturalization is an imperative and that sooner or later one has to decide how to read a text. He goes on to suggest that the reader postpone that moment of decision as long as possible to allow for maximum

appreciation of the text. One could wish that the critics had postponed that moment when coming to both Waiting for the Barbarians and In the Heart of the Country. Perhaps then we would have less criticism that turns Waiting for the Barbarians into an apologia for liberal ineffectuality and complicity and In the Heart of the Country into the ravings of a loony spinster. As I hope to demonstrate in Chapter 2, readings which take stock of the "formal radicalism" of Coetzee's texts might offer more. When Nadine Gordimer says of Life and Times of Michael K "the initial probably stands for Kotze or Koekemoer and has no reference, nor need it have, to Kafka" ("Idea of Gardening" 3) she denies herself the opportunity to examine the intertextual, metafictional aspects of Coetzee's work. Without some understanding of Coetzee's intertext, a novel like Foe appears nigh-on unintelligible. To disregard the ways in which Coetzee is using the techniques of post-modernism is to miss half of his project and to underestimate the intellectual scope of his writing. This move seems rather unwise given that Coetzee is a sophisticated theoretician and practitioner of writing.

III. Formal Innovations, Narrative Techniques, Problematizations

In twentieth-century fiction there is a marked departure from the assumption that novels are unmediated transcriptions of reality and act as windows on the world. The theoretical works of critics such as Barthes and Robbe-Grillet examine the ideological assumptions involved in realist modes of writing, and imply that fiction should be more self-conscious and self-critical. The aesthetic and political challenges to writers in the twentieth-century have resulted in fiction which experiments formally, consciously disrupting its readers' expectations. What is known as post-modernist fiction is one such response. Post-modernist fiction stresses thematically and formally the constructed nature of character and plot and foregrounds the reader's involvement in the production of meaning. Coetzee has testified to the influence of post-modernist writers such as Beckett and Nabokov on his own writing. He has also acknowledged that he is responding to the theories of Barthes and Robbe-Grillet (Speak 24). Critics may therefore feel justified in locating Coetzee's fictions in the post-modernist "tradition" and in interrogating the form of his texts for their significance.

Coetzee has commented on the inadequacy of naturalism as a vehicle for social comment. He calls it naive to assume that literature which presents a "slice of life" can challenge the perceptions of the reader. By implication, there are writing strategies which serve as better vehicles for social comment. Consequently readers of Coetzee's own texts should look beyond the content and analyze their formal properties before attempting to naturalize them or attribute a meaning to them, political or otherwise. Readings which lay aside mimetic theories of literature and which investigate his narrative technique are in a better position to understand the political implications of his fiction.

One of the few critics to allow for the fact that Coetzee's texts involve the reader in the production of meaning is Stephen Watson. He is one of the few to point out the possibility that there is a political intention behind making the reader

the producer of the text. Speaking of In the Heart of the Country, Watson claims that Coetzee:

> wants to create what Barthes would have called a 'writeable' text, 'one which makes the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text'. . . . The novel is surely constructed on the principle that it is through language itself . . . that we are colonized as much as by any overt act of physical conquest. The deconstruction of realism, then, is evidently intended, at the most basic level of language, as an act of decolonization, and as such, is very much a part of the political meaning. (374)

It is not surprising that Watson uses this particular novel as a springboard for his observations. As I indicated earlier, In the Heart of the Country appears to be the novel which is the most difficult to naturalize and which is least appreciated by reviewers. Out of Coetzee's novels, Magda's discontinuous narrative fragments constitute the greatest challenge to realist reading habits: for readers accustomed to novels which act as windows on the world, Magda's monologue appears as crazed glass. The reviewers' reluctance to abandon mimetic theories of literature to engage with Coetzee's more problematic texts amounts to a refusal to play the part of a producer of meaning; or as Watson suggests, a willingness to be colonized. Coetzee's writing strategies force the reader to participate to a greater extent than does realist fiction. His reviewers seem to want the illusion that they are not being colonized and they object to what they understand as being told by Coetzee how to read his novels. For example, they object to Magda's giving dissertations on her behaviour and to the Medical Officer interpreting Michael K for them. At the same time, they refuse to abandon their aesthetic criteria and concomitant interpretive strategies, and, as a result, feel at liberty to marginalize the more problematic texts. They do not scrutinize the texts considering the possibility that Magda's dissertations and the Medical Officer's diagnoses are ironically inserted.

The reviewers frequently misinterpret the metafictional dimensions of Coetzee's writing. They misunderstand the overtly metafictional elements such as the ironic insertions, and miss the metafictional intent of disruption of plot and characterization. Linda Hutcheon's distinction between "thematized" and "actualized" metafiction perhaps sheds some light on Coetzee's practice and their misunderstanding of it. "Thematized" metafiction is that which makes the production of meaning and the construction of art a theme in the novel. The Kunstlerroman is a typical example. "Actualized" metafiction is fiction which through its very construction disrupts and lays bare the processes by which meaning is produced. Coetzee's texts employ both thematized and actualized metafictional techniques to varying degrees. Waiting for the Barbarians "thematizes" its production in that the Magistrate discusses his desire to write his account and the difficulties he has in writing at all. In the Heart of the Country "actualizes" its production by presenting a series of narrative fragments which the reader has to navigate. Foe's discussion of the inadequacy of Susan Barton's story in Foe is thematized metafiction whereas the layering of narrative voices in the novel as a whole is actualized metafiction. Another way of describing the difference would be to see the two as "showing" and "telling"--thematized metafiction "tells" while actualized metafiction "shows." The reviewers therefore cannot see what they are "shown" and do not like what they are "told." If we allow that Coetzee is mounting a serious attack on realism, and that this attack is, as Watson says, "an act of decolonization and as such is very much a part of the political meaning," we must accept that thematic readings of Coetzee's texts do not take us very far. The questions then are: What disruptions of readers' expectations are evident in his texts? Does his experimentation with form call into question the ways in which we structure our reality? Does he thereby provide us with the weapons to deconstruct those enabling mythologies which his works seek to expose? Such an examination of the formal properties of his novels would have to take into account

the disruption of plot, the construction of character, and the structuring devices of intertextual reference and self-reflexive metaphor.

As we have seen in the criticism of In the Heart of the Country, plot disruption is one of the most immediate causes for concern amongst reviewers. Where the narrative has a beginning, a middle and an end, critics seems quite happy. Where there are multiple versions and the plot remains undecidable, there is "much confusion." Rather than assume that Coetzee has lost control of his material when he offers a plurality of plots, it seems appropriate to consider it as an intentional part of his technique.

Speaking of Dusklands, Coetzee acknowledged that it was a more formally innovative work than his later novel Waiting for the Barbarians. This formal innovation has been largely overlooked yet is surely part of the "message" of the work. The narrative of Eugene Dawn is juxtaposed with that of Jacobus Coetzee. Thematically, Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee are both dealing with the question of how to subjugate the natives. Both offer highly intellectual dissertations on motive and intention, yet both seem singularly unaware of their own historical antecedents. The form in which the text is organized, however, works against their complacent assumptions about themselves. Both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee assume they can and do know themselves, understand their motives and act autonomously. The ordering of the fiction suggests the opposite. Dawn assumes that he can stand outside discourse, that he can perceive and control its mechanisms, yet he is unaware that he has fallen victim to his own mythologies (e.g. in his patriarchal manipulation of his son, his fetishistic relationship with his wife). And it is on the subject of the replication of mythology that the form of Dusklands is most instructive. Dawn's aggression, pride, self-assertion and racism are all cultural attitudes inherited from the culture which shaped Jacobus Coetzee. Jacobus Coetzee is, if you like, a cruder prototype of Dawn, armed with a musket instead of napalm and Agent Orange.

Jacobus Coetzee's own narrative is not told once, but three times from three different perspectives. The three versions offer differing legitimizations of the same racist, patriarchal behaviour which we see mirrored in Dawn's narrative. The Jacobus Coetzee story is told first by Jacobus Coetzee himself, in first person narrative; then by Dr. S.J. Coetzee (the translator's father) and lastly by Jacobus Coetzee in third person narrative in his official 1760 deposition.

In the Preface, the translator claims that:

> the present publication is an integral translation of the Dutch of Jacobus Coetzee's narrative and the Afrikaans of my father's introduction, which I have taken the liberty of placing after the text in the form of an Afterword. . . . Otherwise, the sole changes I have made have been to restore two or three brief passages omitted from my father's edition. (55)

This Preface, apparently supported in its claims to authenticity by the "South African National Archives" and the "Van Plettenburg Society" (55), sets the reader up for a huge shock. Early on in Jacobus Coetzee's narrative in his own voice, the reader becomes aware that the idiom of Jacobus Coetzee's observations, if not the observations themselves, belong to a consciousness more modern than that of an eighteenth-century frontiersman. The reader who has accepted the translator's claims of authenticity is the victim of a literary hoax in the manner of Nabokov's Pale Fire.

It is possible, however, to read the collection of the narratives, preface, notes and appendices as more than Nabokovian playfulness and a spoof on the paraphernalia of scholarship. They can be seen as a serious exposure of the changes in dominant discursive practices. I am using discursive practice here in the sense that Foucault uses it in The Archaeology of Knowledge: the intersection of "knowledge," including all writing (travelogues, history, prefaces etc.) and power. Read forwards, the Narrative is concluded, "closed," with supporting appendices,

notes, and so on. Read in reverse order, the history of legitimization of imperialism and racism is laid bare.

Peter Knox-Shaw's article "Dusklands: A Metaphysics of Violence" discusses the real historical documents and diaries which provided Coetzee with his fictional framework. "Of the four documents that comprise the second part of Dusklands only the last is authentic: the three page deposition made by Jacobus Coetzee at the Castle in 1760" (66). He goes on to tell us that there exists "an uneventful though fairly detailed diary . . . kept by Carel Frederick Brink" of Jacobus Coetzee's second journey which J.M. Coetzee has, to use his own term, cannibalized (Speak 24). Knox-Shaw lays passages of Dusklands alongside Brink's report to prove his case. He points out an interesting manipulation of source material by J.M. Coetzee--one which will be of relevance again later--the effacement of economic motive:

> The copper mine which Jacobus Coetzee had noted in his deposition appears in Dusklands merely as a date "carved on rocks." Nothing is made of the gold dust which Jacobus Coetzee gathered on the banks of the Great River and later displayed at the Castle (indeed the omission is noted). (68)

Knox-Shaw states that "in place of the mercenary concerns that predominate in most early colonial travelogues, John Coetzee foregrounds his encounter with primitives" (68). His article goes on to examine the metaphysics of violence in a close reading of Jacobus Coetzee's first person narrative. While it is a valuable observation that Jacobus Coetzee's narrative effaces the deposition's mercenary concerns, Knox-Shaw does not consider in any great depth Dr. S.J. Coetzee's Introduction, nor the editorial tamperings that are excused as "two or three brief passages" (55). A Foucaultian reading would include these as further examples of legitimating discourse in a genealogy of imperialism and racism.

The shifts in legitimating discourse are evident in the attitudes to the land and

the natives. In the deposition, which comes first in terms of chronology, the assumption is that the land is ripe for exploration and exploitation. Jacobus Coetzee has been sanctioned by the Governor to go and shoot elephants. The resources of the country into which he travelled are highlighted in the deposition, "The Great Namaquas . . . are . . . provided in abundance with cattle and sheep of excellent quality because of the lush grasslands and the various flowing streams" (124). The deposition also notes "besides divers as yet unknown copper mountains, [he] encountered . . . a mountain covered all over in a glittering yellow ore" (125). Part of the deposition's effectiveness depends on the contextual knowledge of South Africa today that is available to the reader. Coetzee's South African audience would be aware that the land of the Great Namaquas is now almost exclusively in the hands of White farmers. They would also be aware that the "glittering yellow ore" and the rich mineral resources of South Africa and Namibia have been and still are the cause of fierce aggression and war. The goldrush prompted Britain's annexation of the former Boer territories, the Boer War involved the deaths of thousands. The main reason for South Africa's continued occupation of Namibia is its mineral wealth. The colours of the African National Congress are emblematic of the dominant role of mineral wealth in South African history: black for the people, green for the land, and yellow for the gold.

The natives in the 1760 deposition are described in exactly the same flat tone as the queer new creature, presumably a giraffe, that Jacobus Coetzee noticed on his travels. The report indicates that the dominant attitude was that the natives were as alien as animals, as gullible as children "fond of beads but most of all copper" (124). Their hair, skin and clothing are described in a detached, objective manner. The detachment allows the explorers to ignore the diplomatic imperatives that would obtain between equally powerful countries. The narrator goes to hunt in the land of the Great Namaquas using as authority the Governor's permission. This argument, one frequently used on children, amounts to "You must accept

because I say you must." In case of further recalcitrance, Jacobus Coetzee makes "demonstration of his weapons" (124). The Governor's word will be executed by force if necessary.

The Afterword by Dr. S.J. Coetzee justifies the same annexation of the land and exploitation of the people. Where the deposition is somewhat bald in its assertions, the Afterword is more sophisticated in its reasoning. Dr. S.J. Coetzee is keen to rectify "certain of the anti-heroic distortions that have been creeping into our conception of the great age of exploration" (108). The attitude that the land is there for the taking and the natives deserve what they get is excused through Dr. S.J. Coetzee's reworking of Christian mythology:

> The tribes of the interior sold their herds for trash. This is the truth. It was a necessary loss of innocence. The herder who, waking from a drunken stupor to the wailing of hungry children, beheld his pastures forever vacant, had learned the lesson of the Fall: one cannot live forever in Eden. The Company's men were only playing the role of the angel with the flaming sword in this drama of God's creation. The herder had evolved one sad step further towards citizenship of the world. (110)

This legitimation is a more modern version of the one which has buttressed White supremacy in Southern Africa for centuries. The claim that black men are the "hewers of wood and drawers of water" according to God's holy law is a familiar one in South Africa. Coetzee is not alone in examining this kind of self-justification. Andre Brink's novel A Chain of Voices, for example, analyses the use of the Bible in eighteenth-century ideology. However, Coetzee's Dusklands is a more thoroughgoing investigation of the genealogy of legitimation. The Afterword not only exemplifies the dominant cultural assumptions of Whites about Blacks, but also those of the Afrikaners about the English. It is not surprising that the course of lectures from which the Afterword is composed coincides with

accession to power of the National Party (1948). The Afterword uses as its legitimation the peculiarly Afrikaner notion of the Whites being God's chosen people. Hence we witness the rewriting of history according to dominant ideology.

The observation that the consciousness of Jacobus Coetzee evident in his first person narrative is too modern to be that of an eighteenth-century frontiersman is something of a commonplace in the criticism of Dusklands. A more fruitful way of understanding this fact would be to see it as the last example in a continuum of legitimations. The worldview of the Company's men is shown to be going through a series of transformations. The Afterword reproduces the same worldview using the Word of God in place of the Word of the Governor. In Jacobus Coetzee's own narrative, different means are used to achieve the same ends. Jacobus Coetzee is modern in that he is an alienated consciousness in a godless, solipsistic universe:

> The gun stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself. The gun is our last defence against isolation within the travelling sphere. . . . The gun saves us from the fear that all life is within us. It does so by laying at our feet all the evidence of a dying and therefore a living world. (79)

Jacobus Coetzee's narrative uses modern equivalents to justify the same actions. His highly individualized, angst-ridden quest can be understood in terms of twentieth-century models of interpretation. His actions can be seen as the Self asserting its existence through the destruction of the Other. Here, Jacobus Coetzee is completely in line with post-modernist theories of interpretation.

The three tellings of the same events from such different angles are surely a large part of the "content" of Dusklands. The ways in which society legitimates the use of power are seen in three different historical contexts. By marking the shifts in discursive practice, J.M. Coetzee points out the fictionality of history and the relativity of truth. The construction of reality is shown to be always prone to

the interference of dominant modes of interpretation and dominant discursive practices.

All of Coetzee's novels stress the constructedness of their fictions. Waiting for the Barbarians and In the Heart of the Country do so through explicit reference to writing: Magda is supposedly writing her diary; the Magistrate, the annals of the town. Dusklands indicates this through the juxtaposition of contradictory yet related narratives, that is, in its plot. Foe similarly stresses the construction of reality through language in its plot by using a layering of narratives. Michael K's story is presented from two points of view, the impersonal narrator's, and the prison officer's; the latter's reworking and interpreting the events of the former. By foregrounding the construction of fiction, Coetzee deconstructs realism.

Foe is not about Daniel Defoe but about fiction. In it, Susan Barton has a story to tell which she wants Mr. Foe to write. Like In the Heart of the Country and Life and Times of Michael K, the novel is about the difficulty of getting one's story told. Foe analyses the difficulties Susan Barton has in doing so not only thematically, but also formally. The novel presents the reader with a jumble of information which does not proceed chronologically. The reader is engaged, just as Cruso and Foe are, in piecing together the parts of Susan Barton's story. It is in the telling and retelling of her story that Coetzee comments on the strategies by which people, and here specifically women, manage to attract attention and qualify for having their stories listened to.

The novel opens in medias res with Susan Barton telling Foe about how she swam to Cruso's island. How she came to be cast away, how she arrived in England and came to be writing her story is recounted later. She meets with Friday and Cruso and tells the story of swimming ashore again. The retelling can be seen as the redundant repetition of an incompetent narrator. However, if one compares the two passages in detail, some interesting observations about the way

women get their experiences listened to become apparent. In the version she relates to Cruso, Susan Barton says:

> '"Then at last I could row no further. My hands were raw, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard and began to swim towards your island. The waves took me and bore me onto the beach. The rest you know. (11)

The account is obviously directed at Cruso. It is only in retrospect that she could call the island his for diplomatic reasons. Compare the opening paragraph of the novel, directed ostensibly at Foe but also at us. It is, after all, the opening paragraph which must succeed in attracting our attention:

> 'At last I could row no further. My hands were blistered, my back burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped over-board. With slow strokes, my long hair floating about me, like a flower of the sea, like an anemone, like a jellyfish of the kind you see in the waters of Brazil, I swam towards the strange island, for a while swimming as I had rowed, against the current, then all at once free of its grip, carried by waves into the bay and onto the beach.
>
> 'There I lay sprawled on the hot sand, my head filled with the orange blaze of the sun, my petticoat (which was all I had escaped with) baking dry upon me, tired, grateful, like all the saved. (5)

From a conventional literary perspective, this is the better passage, packed as it is with exotic imagery and sexual metaphor. Here we have, tantalizingly alluded to, the escape from terror, here the grateful relief. The passage provokes the questions What has happened? What happens next? A possible reading is that through her experiences both prior to and during her stay on the island Susan Barton has learnt how to present herself. As a woman, she knows how to make herself attractive physically--the floating hair, the petticoat drying on her. The reader becomes something of a voyeur as she sprawls on the sand. The passage

reads as an extended sexual metaphor with Susan struggling against powers greater than herself, her eventual yielding and gratitude being a reworking of the "women like rape" myth. It is as if she has learnt through her attempt to communicate with Foe how to make herself alluring, how to gratify desire. Although on one level the novel plots the course of Susan Barton's accession to language--the quotation marks around the reported speech dwindle from double to single to none--on another, she realizes the price she has to pay in order to do so. Later she says to Foe:

> I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be a story and there is nothing of my own left to me . . . now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? (133)

Who or what is speaking her is a difficult question. Quite literally, the person speaking her is J.M. Coetzee. Within the fictional world of Foe, the forces which are constricting her and taking over her story are patriarchy and the literary institution. These institutions deny her the freedom to express herself as she wants. Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own discusses the effect of a poor environment on the quality of women's writing. Susan points this out herself: "I wrote my memoir by candlelight in a windowless room, with the paper on my knee. Is that the reason . . . why my story was so dull--that my vision was blocked, that I could not see" (127). Mr. Foe, as owner of the house and literary figure is not so blocked. He can act as her critic because he is an agent of the institutions which inhibit her. He tells her she cannot tell her story in the way she wants. Her proposed story does not satisfy, it needs fleshing out. He rehearses how this is to be done:

> We have therefore five parts in all: the loss of the daughter; the quest for the daughter in Brazil; abandonment of the quest, and the adventure

> of the island; assumption of the quest by the daughter; and reunion of the daughter with her mother. It is thus that we make up a book: loss, then quest, then recovery; beginning then middle then end. (117)

The Chinese box story-within-a-story that Foe outlines serves two purposes. We are forced by his observations to notice what is missing in Foe, which is precisely the insertion he suggests: the daughter and the account of Susan's time in Bahia. We are also forced to notice that we supply these elements by reconstructing her story chronologically. We also have the completed fiction of Crusoe's island in Robinson Crusoe for comparison. Talking to Foe, Susan Barton says "Once you proposed to supply a middle by inventing cannibals and pirates. These I would not accept because they were not the truth" (121). We know only too well which novel is alluded to here. Defoe's text is not Susan Barton's truth, and the fact women's experience gets ignored and denied to make way for macho swashbuckling becomes apparent. The disruption or manipulation of plot in Coetzee's fiction is part of the deconstruction of realism and the decolonization of language. The narrative layering of Foe reveals the ways in which events are selected, interpreted and recorded. The lack of a traditional beginning, middle and end structure implicates the reader by his/her desire for one. The multiple versions in Foe, In the Heart of the Country, Dusklands and Life and Times of Michael K stress the processes of producing meaning. They allow no final version, no master narrative. Thus they are open-ended and absent-centred. They refuse the tyranny of chronology and Aristotelian poetics. In so doing, they attempt to avoid the certainty of the various thematic readings we have seen in Chapter 1. Coetzee's manipulation of plot should teach us not to look for "truth."

Another factor which should alert the reader to the impossibility of determining the "truth" in Coetzee's novels is that the majority are written as monologues. Where the story is dependent on the perspective of one person alone, where there is no controlling authorial voice, the reader should be distrustful of what s/he is

told. Critics are suspicious of Magda's first person narrative and yet are not suspicious of the Magistrate's. Readers acquainted with Coetzee's earlier fiction should beware of accepting the Magistrate's story as it points out the dangers of taking accounts at face value. For example, Jacobus Coetzee recounts the death of his faithful servant twice, giving two different reasons for his death. The second account comes immediately after the first. Knox-Shaw remarks, "the disjunctive is intended to alert us to the ease with which a sole witness may falsify facts prejudicial to his self-justification" (70). The ability of the sole witness to falsify facts is one which all of Coetzee's fictions explore, and the use of monologue makes it impossible for us ever to know the facts. The contradictions that exist in the self-presentations of the Magistrate, Jacobus Coetzee, and Eugene Dawn appear as slight hiccups in the narratives. With Magda's monologue the contradictions between the narrative fragments are impossible to overlook. It does not stretch the limits of credibility to accept the double version of Klawer's death as an example of faulty memory, or to accept the inconsistencies in Eugene Dawn's narrative as a lack of self-scrutiny. We can assume that the facts are there but the central characters have obscured them. The questionability of facts in In the Heart of the Country is so foregrounded that it is impossible for the reader to iron out the contradictions. In the Heart of the Country does not allow us the same exits and the experience of reading the novel is a much more comprehensive challenge to our capacity to naturalize.

Magda's monologue presents the reader with many events which are repeated and/or contradicted. She kills her father with an axe, and later with a gun, and later she is nursing him as a geriatric. She describes being raped by Hendrik the servant four times, with variations. Her monologue reads as a collection of narratives, each with a narrating consciousness, an "I," which is separate from the others. Because of its form, because it is a monologue, the "I's" in the text are the only "I's" there are. I have already pointed out that the diary-motivation for

the text is a construct of the reviewers' making. The ontological status of the text is such that there is no certainty about the locus of the real "I" which negates all the other "I's" by relegating them to the status of fantasy. The "I" in one of the discontinuous narratives is as authoritative as the "I" in another. The "I" that kills the father with an axe has the same textual status as the "I" that tends the incontinent father. Thus Coetzee challenges assumptions about the world and the word and points out that the self is constructed in language and not prior to it. Any naturalization of the text which privileges one of the "I's" over another is of necessity an extra-textual predilection of the reader based on the reader's attitude toward morality, feminine psychology and so forth.

The fictionality of the "I's" is marked repeatedly to the point where one wonders at the ease with which some critics have been able to state that one sequence of events is real and another fantasy. "I create myself in words" says Magda, (8): "I make it up in order that it shall make me up" (73).

Because Magda does not supply a frame story, she does not "frame" herself as mad. It is only possible to count her (discount her) as mad if one accepts one narrative as true and all the others as false (because one cannot kill one's father twice). On a textual level, her madness is undecidable because of the lack of a frame and also because she does not speak like a deranged person. Speaking of madness in the Middle Ages, Foucault remarks: "At all events, whether excluded or secretly invested with reason, the madman's speech did not strictly exist. It was through his words that one recognized the madness of the madman" (Discourse on Language 217). The same processes of exclusion obtain today. The madman's speech makes no "sense," it cannot be naturalized or brought within the dominant discursive order. Magda's production of intelligible text thus "proves" that she is not mad.

Let me point out here that the impossibility of securely charging Magda with being mad does not give her absolute freedom. Each but not every one of the

discontinuous narratives suggests in its own way a person who is functioning outside the societal norms of at least South Africa in the days of horses and carts. But the notion of framing might help us here in inquiring as to the reasons why Magda might behave in the ways she does. A possible reading is that she is framed or circumscribed by a literary and psychoanalytic discourse which is ill-suited to her specific spatio-temporal experience. It is too simple to say either she is mad or she is not mad without scrutinizing the evidence that is given both explicitly and implicitly in the text. Her "madness" might well be inscribed.

Critics have ignored the highly self-conscious, self-reflexive and allusive nature of Magda's narrative. This is strange because she provides us with clues as to the origins of her narrative. The critics seem to have no difficulty categorizing Magda as a farmer's daughter, spinster, white South African yet seldom does anyone raise this question: in what ways is her narrative uncharacteristic of or informed by her experience as the above? I have indicated the "naturalness" that critics imply in equating spinster with madwoman; Magda herself predicted this on page 8: "In the cloister of my room, I am the mad hag I am destined to be" and earlier:

> But what other tale is there for me? Marriage to the neighbour's second son? I am not a happy peasant. I am a miserable black virgin, and my story is my story even if it is a dull black blind stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning and of all its many possible untapped happy variants. I am I. Character is fate. History is God. Pique, pique, pique. (5)

Who or what taught her to perceive herself in this way? Beyond the "real life" interpretation of social practice in agrarian South Africa of the early twentieth-century, I think there is another reading possible. Magda, the self named "poetess of interiority" (35), perceives herself in this way because she has absorbed the lessons of literature, particularly fiction. "Would that I had never learned to read" (49) she announces after describing her sense of alienation from self and

envy of the veld flowers' pure ecstasy of being.

Being other than herself, she constantly casts and recasts herself according to fictional models, and the fictional models she has are always the products of phallogocentric culture (patriarchal, print-oriented culture). More than that, they are the products of the First World. One can almost reconstruct her bookcase from her indications of her narrative inheritance. She casts herself as fin de siècle decadent, gothic villain, madwoman in the attic, and incestuous aristocrat all in the first twenty pages. "My learning has the reek of print" (47) she tells us, marking the intersection between her reading and her writing (writing here understood as the text of herself which she gives us). This intersection is indicated on the first page: "I was in my room, in the emerald semi-dark of the shuttered late afternoon, reading a book or, more likely, supine with a damp towel over my eyes fighting a migraine" (emphasis mine). The reading of books enables an isolated farm woman to perceive light as "emerald" and headaches as "migraines." Her experience "with its migraines and siestas, its ennui and speculative languors" (19) is constituted by texts which allow virtually no room for her. Whether she draws on Greek tragedy, "those are the antagonists" (1), "I have lived all my life in a theatre of stone" (3); or the gothic novel, "I was in my room in the dark west wing eating my heart out and biding my time . . . neglected, vengeful" (2); or Poe's The Fall of the House of Usher, "I am . . . suspended here . . . until a certain act is committed . . . or somewhere a castle crumbles into a tarn, whatever that may be" (17); or Jane Eyre, "What of firing the house about all our ears? Am I equal to that?" (15), she is always faced with the fact that these narratives are coercive and force her into the role of either avenger or madwoman. The action or fantasy that proceeds from this construction of self is scripted for her. In the same way that she is scripted by her dominant literary discourse to go mad, we are scripted by our dominant psychoanalytic discourse to identify her as wanting to be seduced by her father.

The text does seem to invite this Oedipal interpretation: "we have retired to sleep, to dream allegories of baulked desire such as we are blessedly unfitted to interpret" (3) and "Wooed when we were little by our masterful fathers, we are bitter vestals, spoiled for life" (3). There are numerous other examples. However, it seems to me that the text anticipates this interpretation and attempts to deconstruct Freudian analysis at the same time as it invites it. Events immediately before and including the shooting of the father support this statement.

As written in the script, Magda visits the primal scene where the father is having intercourse with the servant girl Anna. She is rebuffed. The incident is repeated. She is either rejected forcefully or treated as if she is sick. She returns, this time with a bell which she shakes outside their bedroom. He comes out and beats her and disappears again, locking the door. She gets the gun and shoots him in his bed. Not once does she supply a clear motive for going to his room or killing him. The Freudian analysis of the Oedipus complex only partially applies. Magda is supposed to visit the (displaced) scene of her parents' love-making. Magda is supposed to desire her father as representative of the law and custodian of reason and language, but it is only male children which are supposed to fantasise the killing of the father, only male children can hope to accede to that position of power.

Rather than interpret Magda's killing of the father as originating in her inability to take the place of Anna in her father's bed, I would suggest that Magda's actions can be read as an attempt to overthrow the rule of the patriarch. The ringing of the bell is a metaphor for both auto-eroticism and non-logocentric communication. Ringing the bell, Magda "hums," "loses track of time," "thaws," "grows soft," "begins to vibrate" (57). Afterwards she says "I was satisfied while I stood ringing the bell and humming in the dark" (59). It is not important to establish whether or not Coetzee knows that "ringing one's bell" is slang for clitoral stimulation because these implications are there in the text anyway. In

other words Magda does not need the literal phallus for her sexual gratification. Nor does she need the Lacanian phallus, the signifier which will give her access to language, in order to express herself. Coetzee has great fun with the phallic symbolism here; not only does Magda shoot her father with his own gun but the gun is kept in the umbrella stand. The failure of her attempt to overthrow the rule of the patriarch is signalled by the fact that she has to borrow her father's phallic symbols in order to communicate beyond herself.

The apparent unsupplantability of male discourse is something of which Magda is aware: "Am I one of those people so insubstantial that they cannot reach out of themselves save with bullets?" (59). Magda senses her defeat:

> Whose creature, in a tale of unconscious motives, would I be? My freedom is at risk, I am being worked into a corner by forces beyond my control. . . . It makes no difference that the corner presents itself to me at this moment as a long walk on the open road: at the end of it I shall discover that the earth is round: corners have many shapes. (63)

Magda's "freedom" is always at risk, as it is always circumscribed by discursive practices. The only freedom possible is the freedom of the person who lives outside of society. Thematically, Magda achieves this freedom only when she is alone on the farm, although she attempts to break down the barriers that separate her from Hendrik and Anna. Textually, Magda cannot achieve "freedom" because to speak is to participate.

This insistence on character as textual construct is one which is more obvious in In the Heart of the Country than in some of Coetzee's other novels. It is most particularly with Magda that he breaks the rules of characterization, allowing her to be discontinuous, contradictory and ambiguous. Magda is problematic and is meant to be so. In an interview, Watson asked Coetzee the following question:

> Some have found it incongruous, or implausible should I say, that a

> frontiersman of the Eighteenth Century like Jacobus Coetzee should be delivering such essentially modern meditations on exploration, the myth of the gun et. cetera, and perhaps more so that a colonial spinster like Magda should speak in a form and tone that is so obviously a product of modern urban consciousness. How would you reply to such a criticism? (Speak 24)

Coetzee retorted, "I would reply to a criticism like that by saying that (a) Jacobus Coetzee is not an Eighteenth Century frontiersman and (b) Magda is not a colonial spinster." Watson, nothing daunted, pursued with "What are they then?" and Coetzee, with obvious impatience, answered "I . . . figures in books." The discussion of character was dropped at this point, where the two opposing views of characterization clashed. Watson obviously wanted to read character in the old way, according to the tenets of realist fiction. In the idiom of post-modernist criticism, he subscribes to the myth of presence. He assumes that characters reflect/represent figures in the real world. Hence, he finds it inconsistent that a fictional character whose consciousness seems to belong in this age should be located in the historical context of another age. He does not allow for it being an intentional juxtaposition. Magda and Jacobus Coetzee are merely articulating their experiences and desires in the idiom of the twentieth-century. Coetzee is, in a manner of speaking, removing one of the steps in the interpretive act by supplying us with the twentieth-century idioms. We would reclaim Magda's narrative and cast it in terms of lack/loss/desire etc. anyway, if he had not done so.

It appears that the incongruities between attitude and location are more difficult to naturalize than the anomalies in the construction of a character such as Susan Barton. In terms of her fictional world, she is something of an impossible object, rather like an Escher drawing. If we accept as true all of her statements, she gives us ontological vertigo. She tells us the story of going to visit Foe, who is in one sense her creation. We only see Foe through her eyes, Foe only exists

in her report. All of their conversations are in reported speech. Yet, at the same time she tells us that she is waiting for Foe to liberate her by writing her story--"Here I wait for you to appear, for the book to be written that will set me free of Cruso and Friday" (66), or again earlier, "Can you not press on with your writing Mr. Foe, so that Friday can be speedily returned to Africa and I liberated from the drab existence that I lead?" (63).

This history never gets written, and what we have, we assume, is her memoir of the island followed by a collection of letters. Although she wishes Foe to tell her story, she also does not wish it, for she knows that he will revamp it for public consumption and include cannibals and pirates and God knows what to entertain the readers. She insists to Foe that she tells her story her way, "I choose rather to tell of the island, of myself and Cruso and Friday and what we three did there: for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire" (131). If the memoirs are her own story, then in her sense she is free. If the real world reference of Robinson Crusoe is the story she wants told, she is annihilated. The fictional Foe acts as a God figure in a god-game. As P.N. Furbank points out in his review "Mistress, Muse and begetter," "Foe amuses himself and abuses his position by playing conjuring tricks on Susan, sending her characters out of Roxana, a lost daughter and her nurse Amy, to persecute her" (995). If Foe can do this in Susan's world, Susan is not free but subject to his whim. It is after a particularly trying time with Foe's (Defoe's) other characters that she exclaims "Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong?" (133). The avid reader is doubtless agonizing over these questions. And like an Escher drawing, Susan and Foe are both undecidable. We have to be content with the words on the page, their textuality and their instability. We have to relinquish our realist reading habits, or be forced to acknowledge our preference for the predominance of one character over another.

The instability of character is more marked in Foe than it is in Coetzee's other novels. "Magda" allows us to assume that, contradictory as her discrete narratives are, they all originate from the same character. Magda tells us her own (multiple) story. The stories might conflict yet her role as focalizer remains constant. Susan Barton starts off being the focalizer in Foe. In the fourth section her voice disappears entirely. She is last seen "quietly composed . . . in her shift," interestingly, in the same state of undress as she was when the novel opened. Only her writing remains: "Dear Mr. Foe, At last I could row no further." Her words (and hence her story) are taken over by the unnamed narrator of the last section who slips overboard himself in search of Friday's story. Jane Gardam's review claims that, "In the last pages of Foe, Coetzee himself goes searching for the body of Friday" (49). It is tempting to imagine that the final section is a flight of fancy engendered in the author by his visit to Daniel Defoe's house. "A plaque is bolted on the wall. Daniel Defoe, Author, are the words, white on blue, and then more writing too small to read." The inclusion of this detail encourages us to imagine a visitor (Coetzee in his research, say), noticing the plaques which the National Trust in twentieth-century Britain has bolted onto famous houses. However, the whole of the preceding narrative should make us wary of doing so. The connection between Foe and Defoe is as tenuous as that between Coetzee and the narrator of the final section.

It should be apparent from the Watson interview that Coetzee does not subscribe to a mimetic theory of literature. With characters such as Magda, Susan Barton and Foe who are prone to disintegration, collapse and disappearance, we realize that we are dealing with writing that starts from a different set of premises. Readers can approach Eugene Dawn and Michael K as realist figures with some degree of success. They can excuse the contradictory elements in the characterization of Dawn and the Magistrate as evidence of their being unreliable narrators. From there, the reader can escape into the security of knowing that

s/he knows something about the characters that they do not know about themselves. This kind of reading experience is like witnessing dramatic irony. The real state of affairs is known to the readers but not the participating characters. With characterization such as in Foe or In the Heart of the Country, Coetzee explodes this assumption. There is no "real state of affairs" save the one we provide. Just as we choose to validate or to invalidate Magda according to an extra-textual set of predilections, so we choose to supply the extra-textual set of analogies by which we connect "text" with the "real world." And this action should tell us something about the way we choose to see the world.

An extreme version of this position on the textual nature of fictional character is quoted in Rimmon-Kenan's Narrative Fiction: "Emma Woodhouse is not a woman nor need be described as if it were" (33). In semiotic criticism, "characters at most are patterns of recurrence, motifs which are continually recontextualized in other motifs" (32). Although this approach to character might appear rather dry and limited, the latter observation does, nonetheless, seem to describe quite accurately the acts we are invited to perform in making a character like Magda intelligible. As we have seen, her observations separate into clusters, some of which invite Freudian interpretation, some Lacanian, some Marxist and so on. Some of the motifs locate her in the late nineteenth century, some in the twentieth century. We are used to the various clusters not being mutually exclusive but working in unison. However, we cannot rid Magda's monologue of all its contradictions without whiting out some of the words on the page.

It is with In the Heart of the Country and Foe that Coetzee most demands that his reader have a literary background. (Perhaps he relies so heavily on intertextuality in these, his most formally innovative texts, because in so doing he can make his readers assume that he writes within the tradition. In other words, he makes maximum room to get himself heard by setting up an elite.) Critics and reviewers have noted Coetzee's manipulation of intertextual reference; Jane

Gardam calls Foe "a literary hide-and-seek" (49). Furbank comments on Foe's "Pirandellian paradoxes about created fictions and their right to a life of their own" (995). He also calls the part where "the writerly Foe" tells Susan that she is wrong to think of written language as a mere symbol for speech "a nice Derridan touch" (995).

It would perhaps be useful to give Barthes' definition of intertextuality at this point to indicate the spread of material included by this term. In "The Theory of the Text" he states that:

> Intertextuality, the condition of any text whatsoever, cannot, of course, be reduced to a problem of sources or influences; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks. (39)

Hence, intertextuality covers not only the explicit references to other literary works (the mention of Defoe in Foe, Herzog in The Vietnam Project) but also the unacknowledged borrowings. Commenting on this Watson says:

> The specifically intellectual quality of his fiction is, of course, immediately noticeable. It is not simply that he is the most bookish of all authors in South Africa. Quotation is basic to his fictional practice. In the first half of Dusklands, for example, one finds a few transposed lines from a John Berryman poem amid other sly allusions to William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot and Franz Kafka. In places, In the Heart of the Country is a tissue of borrowings. (Watson 379)

Coetzee quotes widely and draws on a variety of disciplines. Watson's observation that In the Heart of the Country is a "tissue of borrowings" can be applied to all Coetzee's other novels.

Barthes' definition also covers those references and allusions which cannot be identified with certainty. In this, Barthes sanctions the reader in understanding references where they were perhaps not intended. For example, Coetzee claims that

those figures in South African Literature "who are classed as gigantic, say Schreiner and Campbell, I don't happen to have much interest in" (Speak 22). However, my own feeling is that Schreiner's influence seeps in regardless. Magda is in many ways a reworking of Lyndall in The Story of an African Farm, both of them struggling against the claustrophobic atmosphere of the supposedly idyllic farm setting. Schreiner's novel also seems to have supplied some of the images Coetzee uses in Life and Times of Michael K. Waldo in The Story of an African Farm prepares a little altar on which he places his lunch, a muttonchop. He sits and waits, expecting God to "send fire down from heaven to burn it" (6). Nothing happens. Eventually, some ants come to investigate it. Tried beyond endurance, he gives up and throws the meat away. A parallel scene in Life and Times of Michael K involves Michael K sitting on the farm watching the box of his mother's ashes. "He did not know what he expected; whatever it was, it did not happen. A beetle scurried across the ground. . . . There was another step apparently, that he had to take but could not yet imagine" (58). The intertextual reference in Life and Times of Michael K alludes not only to the existential waiting for Godot but also Waldo waiting for God.

As mentioned earlier, Nadine Gordimer feels that it is inappropriate to read the name Michael K as a reference to Kafka's K. She rejects the intertextual reference, preferring K to stand for the name of a so-called Coloured. In other words she wants the fictional signifier to have a real world referent. A semiotician would do otherwise, not because Coetzee has published on Kafka (authorial intention is irrelevant) but because Life and Times of Michael K has appeared in a signifying system in which Kafka's K already exists. "There is always language before and around the text," Barthes tells us (39). We cannot ignore the fact that Kafka's K is part of the web.

In modern literary theory, intertextuality is posited on the idea of textuality, the idea that the self is constructed in language and that language admits of no

transcendental signifiers because signs are arbitrary. Signs, words, language are constantly invested with and divested of meaning. There is a constant slippage between what is meant and what is understood. Texts are not veils to be pulled aside to reveal the truth but fabrics of interlacing codes.

This attitude to language is one which is evident in Coetzee's writing. The novels abound with examples of his characters trying to tell stories, to close the narrative, to fix truth. Examples are the history of the town which the Magistrate cannot write, the Medical Officer's attempt to interpret Michael K, the unnamed narrator's endeavours to discover Friday's story. Their efforts are all frustrated. The "truth" that the Magistrate feels has been staring him in the face all along ultimately evades him (155), just as the subject of the Medical Officer's story evades him. The reason for their failures is, for those well versed in post-structuralist theory, obvious: truth is merely a function of discursive practice.

The self-reflexivity of Coetzee's texts is important to notice in this context. His novels contain many metaphors for the arbitrary nature of signs. The Magistrate makes repeated efforts to make sense of his world, to interpret the slips he finds in the ruins, or the marks on the walls of the torture chamber or the marks on the barbarian girl's body. These efforts are doomed to failure. Throughout the text there is tension between the search for truth and the awareness that it is a linguistic construction, truth's value being determined by the dominant discursive policy. As Foucault remarks, "It is always possible one could speak the truth in a void; one would only be in the true, however, if one obeyed the rules of some discursive 'policy' which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke" (The Archaeology of Knowledge 224). Here Foucault indicates that truth is a function of social practice. When the Magistrate deciphers the slips for Colonel Joll, he is consciously stepping outside the rules of the game and is tortured for it. The dominance of certain discursive policies allows more freedom to some than to others. This is exemplified in microcosm on the journey beyond

the frontier by the barbarian girl's interaction with the men, conducted "in the pidgin of the frontier" (63). The Magistrate is surprised by her "fluency, her quickness, her self-possession" (63). Her self-possession is only possible in this discursive field. Within the confines of his apartment, she is silenced.

This same metafictional awareness of the plurality of meanings is apparent in all the other texts. Eugene Dawn tells us that he has taped a fountain pen on the bottom of his wife's telephone. "If she finds it she will think it is a bug. If Coetzee finds it he will take it for one of Armco's little bombs" (53). Susan Barton's sketches designed to find out who cut out Friday's tongue are other examples. She realizes the limitations of drawings and the confusion of meanings possible without Friday's ever responding. Through the use of metaphors such as these, Coetzee stresses the arbitrariness of signs and the relativity of meaning.

From the smallest detail to the overall structure, Coetzee's works force his readers to be aware of the interpretive act we engage in to make texts mean. The disruption of plot and the destabilization of character both call into question the way we structure reality. His novels repeatedly demonstrate that they are not to be taken as windows on the Real World. They are constructs, fictions in which the reader is involved in the production of meaning.

The fact that Coetzee's novels expose the permutations of social mythologies and reveal the way in which truth is a function of these mythologies should be liberating. For some, such as Menan du Plessis, the reading of Coetzee's works resulted in "a radical ideological turning" (87). For others, as we have seen in Chapter 1, it resulted in no ideological turning whatsoever. It seems fair to say that some of the critics had not read his texts in any great depth; (and some had not read them at all--witness "the unnamed heroine" of In the Heart of the Country) and, to suggest that after a consideration of his formal and metafictional concerns, different conclusions emerge. How politically useful these conclusions are remains to be seen. Calling truth into question in a Glass Bead Game is one

thing. Refusing to draw any lines and indicate the contingencies by which we make choices about the distribution of power is another. The morality of subscribing to theories of the infinite free play of meaning is questionable at best. Given that Coetzee refuses to be tied down on political issues in interview, his texts and their implicit theoretical origins will have to stand in as proxy in any evaluation of the limitations of his work.

IV. Limitations, Deferrals, Political Implications

I have been arguing that the focus of J.M. Coetzee's work is the interaction of consciousness and discursive practice. His fiction examines the circumscribed nature of human intelligence and indicates that individual experience is limited by political/social/moral codes, or as Foucault calls them, discursive policies. His novels suggest that the idea of selfhood is a tenuous one, constituted by discursive policy. He exposes the givens of western culture, the unity of the self, the notion of progress, the identity of the nation, as no more than functions of various discursive policies. The interaction of discourse and consciousness is not only a thematic concern in his fiction. His narrative technique, and his construction of plot and character also call into question the ways western culture structures its reality. His foregrounding of the structuration of fictional worlds questions the givens of liberal aesthetics, namely the sovereignty of the human subject; the notion of cause and effect; psychological depth and unity; and the capacity for moral development. His novelistic practice implies a rejection of liberal humanism through his exposure of the ideologies which underpin its aesthetics. If this were the case, his novels could be seen as contributing to change in South Africa. For him to question the premises of liberal aesthetics, and by extension, liberal humanism itself, implies that he is dissociating himself from a group whose reformist efforts have failed to make any significant impression in South African politics. Coetzee's rejection of this political stance could mean that he is adopting an alternative position which indicates the way out of the labyrinth in which the Magistrate finds himself. My objective in this chapter is to suggest that, much as one might be tempted to give Coetzee the benefit of the doubt, he does not offer a way out, and that an analysis of the limitations of his fictional practice leads one to the conclusion that "Like the protagonists in his fiction, Coetzee can exemplify this crisis but not explain it" (Vaughan 123).

In order to establish the extent to which Coetzee's novels undermine liberal

aesthetics, it seems to me useful to give an outline of its premises. I am indebted to Vaughan for the following definition. Liberal aesthetics is grounded in what Vaughan calls "an ontology of the individual person" (119). The individual experience is a paradigm for the human condition. The individual person has the free possession of certain fundamental human faculties which are sensuous, intellectual and moral. It is not always possible for these faculties to be freely expressed. Social laws, codes and habits may prevent this. Liberal literature is concerned with "liberating social interactions--as interactions between individual persons--from the inhibiting and perverting effects of social laws and codes. Literature should demonstrate the innate freedom that is thus repressed" (119). The realist novel is the form par excellence which promotes the liberal conception of being since:

> If individuals hold potential mastery over the real world, it follows that a fiction which promotes this mastery must set an example in its own domain. Reality must be mastered, rendered amenable in every facet. This implies an ideal of transparency--of absolute clarity. (120)

According to Vaughan, the implications of liberal aesthetics for the conceptualization of political issues are these: they promote a concern with individual types of encounter at the expense of collective types of encounter; the belief in the self-correctibility of individual interactions leads to the prominence of the concept of dialogue, to the prejudice or exclusion of non-dialoguist types of political strategy; the political perspectives do not go beyond the parameters established by Westminster-style parliamentary democracy. In South Africa, blacks are excluded from parliament. Dialogue, championed by liberals, has failed. Vaughan has claimed that the failure of dialogue in South African politics and the marginalization of the liberal intelligentsia has meant that more writers are rejecting realism as a mode and new types of fiction are emerging. For the purposes of my argument, it is clear that J.M. Coetzee has broken with realism. It is harder

to determine how clean a break this is, and how indicative it is of a radical position. Building on my examination of plot and characterization in the last chapter, my interest now is in the potentially radical nature of Coetzee's fictional practice.

Coetzee's fiction reveals character as construction, as the sum of the fictions the proper name tells about itself. The narratives in which they cast themselves are presented in such a way that the reader is invited to question their consistency and reliability. As we have seen from the reviews, the more realistic the text, the easier it is for the reader to read character in the old way, the easier to claim moral development, ethical vision, etc. Coetzee uses a variety of techniques of characterization. We can see the Magistrate as the character most obviously in the realist mode, and Magda and Susan Barton as originating most obviously in a post-modernist mode. We are, however, on treacherous ground when we assume that apparently realist texts are claiming the realist mastery over time and event. As much as Coetzee deploys the strategies of realist fiction, he also undermines them with post-modernist techniques. My question about the political implications of Coetzee's characterizations remains the same whatever techniques he chooses to adopt.

In an article on Waiting for the Barbarians, Richard Martin has argued that the Magistrate belongs in the realist tradition in spite of the novel's geographical and historical dislocation. Martin calls Waiting for the Barbarians a "mixed case." A mixed case is a novel which has realist content in a non-realist form or non-realist content in a realist form. He identifies Waiting for the Barbarians as the latter type. Martin argues that all the unrealistic details of the setting are redomesticated because of the nature of the narrative voice. The narrator's monologue demonstrates his conceptual mastery over his world. As the Magistrate narrates, he reveals a character, "an autonomous centred subject, behind the narrative and embroiled in the events recounted (both its source and its subject

matter), filled out with a body and a psychology, a past and a present, and a (projected) future" (8). In the setting, the reader may be destabilized, but with the narrator, s/he is back on home ground, in the land of cause and effect, and consistent psychology. The characterization of the Magistrate does not free the reader to reflect on his/its structuration.

I agree with Martin that the narrative voice "suppresses the arbitrariness and conventionality of its modes of reflection, reaction, conception and articulation, giving the impression that it is a direct and immediate (unmediated) transcription of reality" (10). Because the narrative voice functions in this way, the Magistrate constitutes no threat to dominant modes of perception. This character is a reproduction of liberal aesthetics and, as we have seen, has been readily reabsorbed by liberal criticism. Martin sees Waiting for the Barbarians as "a sort of existential tragedy in which the significance of objects and events is their lack of significance: man is defined not by his central position in the world, but by his alienation from that world, from others, from himself" (20). For Martin, this makes Waiting for the Barbarians a peculiarly liberal lament for the death of meaning and as such removes the text from the arena of political debate.

Martin makes the mistake, however, of indexing the liberal assumptions demonstrated in the Magistrate's self-presentation to Coetzee himself. He neglects to consider that the text as a whole may be examining the limits of the Magistrate's conception of reality. One might want to argue that Waiting for the Barbarians has a place in political debate precisely because it exposes the shortcomings of the liberal mind. This kind of reading would argue that the Magistrate is bourgeois but the text is not. It is, however, extremely difficult to determine the validity of this claim. Because Waiting for the Barbarians is written as monologue, Coetzee leaves his text open to all the pitfalls of first person narrative. He does not comment directly on his central character in the text. He does not allow other characters to provide an alternative vision which would control

our understanding of the Magistrate. Colonel Joll's attitudes to the Magistrate cannot provide this vision because we are not sympathetic towards Joll. The only character who does give us some alternative insights is Mai the cook. She reveals that the Magistrate made the barbarian girl cry--a fact of which the Magistrate is unaware. Mai is allowed to function in this way only very briefly. The inclusion of other characters' opinions to control our understanding of the Magistrate is not a method which Coetzee uses in any sustained way.

Another technique for controlling our perception of a first person narrator is the use of embedded narrative. In a sense, the Magistrate's dream cycle is an embedded narrative. What it tells us is not very different from what he tells us in his waking state. In the dream cycle, the Magistrate has visions of wholeness yet he is never an agent in bringing about change. The psychological and emotional equilibrium of the dreams is brought about by the barbarian girl. In the dream world, as in the fictional "real" world, the Magistrate can neither help her nor understand her. Rather than subverting our view of the Magistrate, the embedded narrative reinforces it. Coetzee does not provide an alternative perspective on the Magistrate through commentary, other characters or embedded narration. In doing this he knowingly leaves himself open to being conflated with the Magistrate and applauded or condemned along with him.

One might be tempted to argue that it is to the Magistrate's credit that he does not try to colonize the barbarian girl. In his dealing with her, he does not force her to tell secrets and to the end she remains an enigmatic figure. The Magistrate does not domesticate her Otherness, and, by extension, Coetzee allows her her Otherness by refusing to define her. This refusal could be be seen as conferring textual liberty on the barbarian girl and as rejection of liberal aesthetics through rejection of dialogue. This rejection of dialogue however seems more like a failure of imagination. Whose failure is difficult to know. Coetzee says of the Magistrate:

> He cannot choose the Barbarian way of life although he makes vague gestures in that direction, in the direction of the barbarian girl. But I am sure you remember that there is a strong presence of children in the book and there is no saying--although the book does not deal directly with it--what those children might do and what sort of life they might lead. They might be able to make choices that he finds impossible. (Kunapipi 7)

The Magistrate never learns the girl's language, hence he denies himself the opportunity of dialogue. The reader is left in the same position as the Magistrate, unable to imagine a different life. The terms are absent.

One method realist fiction employs to indicate the political/moral position of the author is the inclusion of other characters to provide alternative points of view. Life and Times of Michael K and Foe are close to realist fiction in that the central character is located in a fictional world in which other characters provide an alternative perspective. Their interaction is not dialogue, however, it is colonization. The other characters in Foe and Life and Times of Michael K do not wish to interact with the central character; they wish to impose their world view on Susan and Michael. Coetzee introduces an external perspective only to deconstruct it, to expose its premises. Foe wants Susan Barton to rewrite herself completely. He instructs her to provide more information, either "real" or fictitious. He insists that she cannot remain as she wishes. The prison doctor in Life and Times of Michael K makes a virtue out of necessity and claims to understand Michael K precisely because he does not understand him. He imagines calling to Michael K:

> Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory--speaking at the highest level--of how scandalously, how outrageously meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. (166)

This manipulation is something that Michael recognizes: "They want me to open

my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages. They want to hear all about the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey" (181). He makes explicit what the medical officer wishes to do.

If Coetzee included the alternative perspectives to shed more light on the violence people do to the narratives of other people's lives, one could see this as a democratic gesture. I am doubtful however, particularly in these two instances. As fast as he exposes the colonial intent of Foe, he reenacts it himself. Susan's narrative voice is usurped. If Coetzee is experimenting with feminist thought in this novel, it is in a dilettante fashion. Foe reads like a nod of a very condescending sort in the direction of feminism. A reworking of Robinson Crusoe which includes a female narrator trying to interest Defoe in her story will, of course, as Coetzee well knows, be understood in current literary discourse as addressing the questions of women and writing, questions of how women are vampirized as thematic content, how their stories, spoken and written, get rewritten or remain unpublished, how women are silenced. Coetzee knows only too well, if he is as erudite as his novels demonstrate, that to get a female character in the twentieth century, regardless of her fictional time, to say "there are no stories of daughters in search of their mothers" (77) is a dangerous political choice unless the text indicates the speaker's lack of feminist awareness. There are plenty of stories of daughters in search of their mothers. A Room of One's Own is one, and one which Coetzee seems happy enough to vampirize in Foe. Coetzee lived and wrote and taught in America for six years. He cannot be unaware that Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck" is a story of daughters in search of lost mothers. When he usurps Susan Barton's voice, when he dives into the wreck (and Coetzee knows that the convention is to ascribe to an unnamed narrator the same sex as the author) he commits the very act of terrorism he has sought to expose. Foe marks its genesis in literary theory on every page. The Derridean touches, the vocabulary borrowed from Lacan, pervade the text. One cannot argue that Derrida

and Lacan are worthy of consideration, while the feminist issues he is exploiting are to be disqualified because they are irrelevant to the fictional time of the story. The best that one can claim is that Coetzee's intrusion into feminism is done unconsciously; the worst, that this is conscious occupation by force. Coetzee has been happy to use Susan Barton's body (in the opening paragraphs) as his entry to his fiction, happy to make her the butt of Foe's mind-games and finally happy to kill her off in the name of his quest. If Coetzee is aware of the politics of feminism, which he should be, he chooses to ignore it in Foe.

The same lack of careful consideration of political ramifications is evident in his treatment of character in Life and Times of Michael K. When one looks at character in all his novels, one becomes aware of the fact that Coetzee chooses to enter only the minds of white characters. This choice is, as Coetzee must know, loaded with significance in the South African context. It leaves the reader wondering whether, like the Magistrate, Coetzee cannot imagine experience outside of his race and class. It would be easier to excuse this gap if his fictional representations of it had remained a gap. With the inclusion of Michael K, what might have been a respectful silence appears as dereliction of moral responsibility. It is impossible to ignore that his canon contains white characters who are extraordinarily erudite and articulate, who are credited with psychological depth and analytic talent and at the same time a character like Michael K, who has been understood as retarded, who shows a low level of linguistic competence and has the life skills of a naive child. When the medical officer and the people he meets at the end of the novel enjoin him to tell his story, the reader is aware that Michael K cannot do so, not only because he does not want to perform, but also because he does not know how: "It struck him too that his story was paltry, not worth the telling, full of the same old gaps that he would never learn how to bridge. Or else he simply did not know how to tell a story, how to keep interest alive" (176). Linguistic competence is linked to intellectual competence in

Coetzee's fiction. Michael K cannot make sense of his reality. In Foe the implication is that Friday would not survive without Susan Barton. Just as he cannot speak, he cannot survive. This amounts to evidence to support the claim that intellect is a function of skin colour in Coetzee's fiction. That he neglects to remove all possibility of this claim being made demonstrates an unwillingness to participate in political debate. To wash one's hands of the struggle between the powerful and the powerless is to side with the powerful.

The lack of authorial comment is the literary result of what I see as a lack of political commitment. Here the form Coetzee most often favours is significant. Speaking of Coetzee's use of monologue, Vaughan says:

> His monologuist narratives--note the absence of dialogue!--constantly invoke the suggestion that they are circumscribed forms of discourse, that they operate within parameters. There is, however, no breakthrough to an alternative, superior form of discourse. (123)

The character speaking is imprisoned in his/her mode of consciousness. Magda offers the story of her life as a multitude of possibilities, each one as circumscribed as the next. None of these possibilities is transcendence but is "paradoxically, further exemplification of the ascribed modes of thinking and relating" (125). Vaughan claims that Coetzee's fiction cannot use protest as a strategy because protest presupposes a belief in the self-correctibility of individual persons. Within the terms of Coetzee's critique, "Such an appeal to normalcy is inconceivable since the principle of racial domination is one of the norms of Western/colonial history" (127). Character in Coetzee's fiction is always determined by its racial-historical mode of consciousness and because of his choice of form, his readers never catch a glimpse of any alternative. Vaughan's conclusion on Coetzee's fiction is this:

> It can exemplify, but not explain, the crisis-state of the agents of domination. It can say next to nothing, and certainly nothing reliable,

> about experiences outside the modality of its own racial-historical dialectic. Characters of other races, the victims of domination, are entirely enigmatic entities within the medium of this fiction. (128)

This same criticism that Coetzee's fiction can only enact but not explain has been made elsewhere. Peter Knox-Shaw, trying to come to terms with the revolting aspects of Jacobus Coetzee's murder of the Hottentots said of the prose: "Controlled certainly--the effect deliberately produced, but in the absence of any other resource it must be said that the writing itself furthers the claims of true savagery. This is the art that can only re-enact" (74). The other resource, the controlling perspective on the central character is absent. By writing monologue, Coetzee has written himself out. In true Beckettian style, we are left with only the words of the character, only the individual testimony. My feeling is that Coetzee gambles on the fact that we will not index the attitudes of the central character to him, just as educated readers would not index the attitudes of Humbert Humbert to Nabokov. What this means is that Coetzee allows himself to escape, to be absent, to be silent. This is surely something of a luxury in his context. W.J.B. Wood is still "reading and trying to come to terms with [his] reading of Dusklands" even though he feels that the novel is not "satisfactorily diagnostic, but curiously symptomatic of the very thing which it purports to diagnose" (22). Many of Coetzee's readers are still trying to give him the benefit of the doubt. When he thwarts dialogue in his fiction and in real life so consistently, one may well start to wonder why. Magda, his most Beckettian character, appears caught in the double bind that silence means the end of her existence yet no speech approximates to her experience. "I can't go--I'll go on" might well stand as her motto. She cannot suspend the flow, yet cannot make language mean for her. An interesting comparison is Coetzee's own observation on why he writes: "It's far from a compulsion. It's bad when I do write and worse when I don't" (Speak 21). Coetzee's writing enacts Magda's double bind yet does

not explain it. Judging from his own remarks, Coetzee does not perhaps know why he writes and if he does he certainly is not saying.

Coetzee's refusal to indicate how we are to interpret character is paralleled in his refusal to indicate how we are to read plot. If we read his novels looking for conflict, climax and conclusion, it is true that we are likely to be disappointed. We could see the disruption of plot as part of Coetzee's anti-realist project. Conventional plot structure is premised on the idea of cause and effect. Plot structure exercises control over time and event, deleting the contingent and the irrelevant. Plot in Coetzee's novels does not demonstrate this conventional mastery over time and events. Time periods are difficult to establish and we are not shown how to subordinate events or hierarchize narratives. For some critics, this has a positive value. Watson claims that "an obvious reason for the use of non-realist devices in Coetzee's texts was ultimately political: he did not want them to be easily assimilated and reduced to a single canonical meaning" (384). It is one thing having a text which forecloses discussion because it can only be read one way; it is quite another to have a text which ends up saying nothing. On the topic of structure Watson says:

> If for instance, one searches inside them, examining their structure, one discovers little more than an artfully constructed void. At the heart of Coetzee's heart of the country, there is nothing. The solid core to his work lies elsewhere, outside the novels themselves, in something that is effaced, implicit, barely alluded to. (377)

If one accepts Watson's claim that there is a solid core to Coetzee's work, but that it lies "elsewhere" and "outside," then one is in a peculiarly disadvantaged position unless one happens to be, like Watson, a personal acquaintance. If one accepts also that the novels are constructed around a void then it is hard to see how a void can have a meaning at all, let alone, as Watson fears, a canonical one. If one identifies Coetzee's novels as mourning the absence of meaning

because they are structured around a void, one should recognize Coetzee as a bourgeois humanist. Here, Robbe-Grillet is relevant:

> Tragedy therefore appears as the last invention of humanism to permit nothing to escape: since the correspondence between men and things has finally been denounced, the humanist saves his empire by immediately instituting a new form of solidarity, the divorce itself becomes a major path to redemption. (59)

The divorce between signifier and signified is a cause for celebration in post-structuralist thought. Coetzee's attention to the textuality of his fiction is quite in keeping with the dominant trends in literary theory. His texts are writerly texts, and the reader is expected to enjoy the use of multiple narratives. With In the Heart of the Country, Coetzee does not indicate which of Magda's narratives has most importance, either in terms of truth or moral worth. As I said earlier, each of the narratives has the same textual status and any hierarchization will be according to the extra-textual predilections of the reader, dictated by his/her assumptions about morality, feminine psychology, race, and class etc.

The enabling of a multiplicity of readings and the reader's involvement in the construction of meaning is a potentially liberating characteristic of post-modernist writing. The plenitude of readings enabled by a text such as In the Heart of the Country allows the reader to reflect on the choices s/he makes in reading. However, no text is completely open-ended and the potential for any reading is something of a chimera. With Magda's narrative(s), none of the variables allows for any positive outcome. There are no reconciliations envisaged, hence no harmony is possible. In the Heart of the Country is similar to Robert Coover's short story The Babysitter in that the readers may join in with the construction of meaning and pick their favourite version yet the versions to choose from do not include all possibilities. The infinite free play of meaning turns out to be a circumscribed choice of meaning. At the heart of Coetzee's In the Heart of the

Country is not nothing, not a void, open to endless interpretation, but the impulse to make meaning out of the limited choice of meanings available.

Watson's own analysis of plot disruption in Coetzee's fiction bears some examination here. He says:

> In the light of the breakdown between theory and practice, it is easy to see why the Aristotelian model for literature, with its definite distinctions between inner and outer, real and unreal, past present and future, beginning middle and end--in short, the model that is at the basis of Western literary realism--should disintegrate as well. As in so much of Beckett's work, the lesson of Coetzee's work is . . . that reality itself becomes conceptually incoherent when individuals can no longer be agents in the world. (384)

Watson makes the useful observation that Coetzee's plot disruption mirrors his characters' feelings of alienation from the world. What I want to stress is that the disjunction between theory and practice is not, as many have understood, a paradigm for the human condition but a particular experience of a particular class at a particular point in time (for example, the White middle class in South Africa today). That disjunction manifests itself in a multiplicity of doom-laden narratives, all of which tell roughly the same story: no change is possible, no act will liberate us either into history (Magda) or out of it (the Magistrate). Ineluctably caught, it does not matter which narrative we tell for they are all the same. No transcendence is possible. These are the implications of Coetzee's fiction. I would argue that the mistake is to recognize this as The Human Condition and not the condition peculiar to, say, the functionaries of Western imperialism or women under patriarchy. To treat it as "natural" rather than as determined is to accept its endless reproduction.

The domestication of the violence that people and systems inflict on each other is a result of Coetzee's choice and presentation of character, his use of monologue

and his undifferentiated narratives. "Significant action, reversal of the impetus of Western domination can only come from outside, by means of a different racial-historical dynamic" (Vaughan 127). Coetzee's fictions do not posit any chance of change coming from those, like the Magistrate and Magda, moulded by Western imperialism. His fictions suggest that he cannot imagine beyond his race and class. They further suggest that these determining factors are ones which Coetzee does not wish to address directly.

Several critics have been unhappy with the fact that Coetzee effaces economic motive. In a novel such as Dusklands, the "history" appears not so much as an explanation of interacting forces, but as one other discourse through which we can interpret events. Peter Knox-Shaw's conclusion is that:

> in conferring the status of categorical imperative upon violence John Coetzee seriously depreciates the force of context. It is regrettable that a writer of such considerable and varied talents should play down the political and economic aspects of history in favour of a psychopathology of Western life. (81)

Knox-Shaw finds Coetzee guilty of explaining away moments in the history of western imperialism not as particular conjunctions of economic or political forces but as a categorical imperative. Coetzee thus identifies violence as inherent in mankind. For him to elevate the violence of western imperialism to the level of the inescapable metaphysical condition of mankind is surely more than regrettable. Even if he believes this, surely he can see it is counterproductive to publish novels which promote his perception of human experience whilst other people are literally dying to be given a chance to prove otherwise.

Abdul JanMohamed's discussion of Waiting for the Barbarians sheds some light on Coetzee's tacit acceptance of imperialism. JanMohamed calls Waiting for the Barbarians a "deliberate allegory" which "epitomizes the dehistoricizing, desocializing tendency of colonialist fiction" (73). The novel, he says:

> refuses to acknowledge its historical sources or to make any allusions to the specific barbarism of the apartheid regime. The novel thus implies that we are all somehow equally guilty and that fascism is somehow endemic to all societies. In its studied refusal to accept historical responsibility, this novel . . . attempts to mystify the imperial endeavour by representing the relation between Self and Other in metaphysical terms. (73)

History means one thing to critical theorists like JanMohamed and Vaughan and another thing to Coetzee. That is not to say that Coetzee is ignorant with regard to historical sources: a look at Knox-Shaw's article on the source material for Dusklands proves Coetzee's erudition in this area. The reader of Coetzee's fiction is often left in the paradoxical position of wishing s/he knew as much as Coetzee obviously does (in order to spot the significance of dates such as 1948 etc.) and wondering what the point of knowing it is. It seems that history, like philosophy and psychology, is just another discourse he can cannibalize, just another model of interpretation he can manipulate yet to which he does not profess to subscribe.

Coetzee's erudition is something that many of his critics have commented on and it is interesting to note that it is something that his supporters are keen to defend. Watson, who almost catalogues Coetzee's intertextual references, starts out by saying that Coetzee might be guilty of inverse provincialism or the cultural cringe. This he then refutes with:

> there is nothing really original about the metaphysics of power [nor anything] specifically complex or particularly original in these [intellectual] elements. Almost all the difficulties of his novels vanish when one happens to have the read the same books he has. (380)

Having already unselfconsciously suggested that Coetzee has "produced by far the most intellectual and indeed intellectualizing fiction of any South African or African

writer" (380: emphasis mine), Watson goes on to suggest that Coetzee:

> wants to join Europe and Africa but not in the old colonial relationship of dominance and subjugation. He wants to preserve the contemplative, mythmaking, sacralizing impulse at the heart of modernism and nevertheless respond to an actual historical moment in which such an impulse could not seem more of an irrelevancy. (388)

It seems rather in the old colonial vein to insist that the tenets of modernism be acceptable to those who are trying to hammer out a new future, when modernism is primarily a First World movement. The mythmaking, sacralizing impulse of indigenous literatures appears to be an irrelevancy.

Another upholder of Coetzee's right to be an intellectual is Menan du Plessis. Defending him from "bourgeois marxists," she hypothesizes that Coetzee will be accused of writing for a bourgeois readership, and "even of pretentiousness ('all those esoteric allusions')" (87). Her defence hinges on "The point . . . that Coetzee does not pretend to write for anyone other than the educated middle-class reader" (87). And an extraordinarily well educated reader at that. It is as if Coetzee's intertextuality and erudition has created a fellowship of discourse as Foucault would have called it, a fellowship which has its vested interests in justifying his elitism. Having won international fame with Waiting for the Barbarians, he can indulge in literary games of dubious political sensitivity in Foe, knowing that others will leap to his defence.

Coetzee refuses to discuss the ideological intentions of his fictional practice. In interview with students, he made the following comment:

> We have not questioned it that intentions lie behind books, behind acts, etc. I would see this assumption as fundamental to the discourse of politics, where it is not meaningful (I think) to talk of acts with no intentions behind them, acts which are themselves efforts to locate their intent. Well, then I would ask: isn't it in fact useful to think that

> there might be acts whose meaning lies before them rather than after them? That's the kind of question I would like to ask before talking about intentions behind or before acts of writing. (Wicksteed 5)

Meaning and intention are not constructed out of thin air. Perhaps it is useful to consider writing--and here I assume he is referring to writing novels--as uncertain of how it might translate into action. Perhaps it is wrong to expect writing to be programmatic, but one can consider whether the subjects/discourses writing cannibalizes are likely to yield anything politically useful. The potential meaning can be predicted from the premises on which that writing bases itself. In other words, the potential political usefulness of Coetzee's novels is limited by the premises from which he writes.

Coetzee's novels all demonstrate his extensive knowledge of post-structuralist thought. This is evidenced by the critical articles variously titled "Sight, Blindness and Doublethought," or "The Presence of Absence." Without a knowledge of Coetzee's intertext it would be difficult to understand Magda's repeated self-presentation as Lacanian Other. She is absence: "To my father I have been an absence all my life" (2); her story has a "yawning middle without an end" (43); she is spoken "not in words . . . but in silences whose grammar has never been recorded" (7). Lacanisms pervade Foe as well. Susan Barton tells the girl who claims to be her daughter "You are father-born. You have no mother. The pain you feel is the pain of lack, not the pain of loss" (91). In the Lacanian scenario, lack of the phallus denies them entry into the symbolic order. They therefore cannot write themselves. Metonymically associated with the phallus is Foe's pen which Susan hesitates to handle (66). Tongues are also incorporated into Foe's Lacanian structure. Friday's has been cut out and Susan is often biting hers: neither of them can enter into the symbolic order. Susan's lack of the phallus means she cannot be father to her own story--a sad fact she dwells on herself. Hence her need of Foe, her need to straddle him and give life to his

pen.

Friday's speechlessness is, in Lacan's model, a result of his genital mutilation. Consequently he is doomed to remain silent. Susan tells Foe that the story of Friday "is properly not a story but a puzzle or a hole in the narrative (I picture it as a buttonhole, carefully cross-stitched around, but empty, waiting for the button" (121). The OOooo's that Friday learns to write are symbolic of his lack. At the end of the novel, the unnamed narrator finds him in the "ooze" (157) still unable to enter the signifying system of language.

Meditations on language pervade Coetzee's fiction. The problematic nature of signs is frequently foregrounded. With very post-structuralist overtones, Foe tells Susan "If we devote ourselves to finding holes exactly shaped to house such great words as Freedom, Honour, Bliss, I agree, we shall spend a lifetime slipping and sliding and searching, all in vain" (149). Marking the slippage, Magda comments "Words are coin. Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire. Desire is rapture, not exchange. It is only by alienating the desired that language masters it" (26). In instances such as these Coetzee indicates his debt to Barthes, Derrida and Lacan and his experimentation with the implications of their ideas on language. If this is the site Coetzee chooses as the theoretical framework for his fiction, what ideological position is thereby implied? An analysis of the political implications of his post-structuralist intertext may reveal the kinds of intentions that his writing is in search of.

Eagleton's essay, "Deconstruction and Marxism" is an attempt to indicate the politics of deconstruction. Eagleton uses the term deconstruction in a broad sense to include all the major French theorists mentioned above. The subjects of his criticism are those who oppose "objectivity" and "interests" and who "reduce the cognitive status of propositions to the play of power and desire" (488). The words power and desire are precisely those which dominate post-structuralist thought. And the theorists of power and desire are precisely those who figure in the

background of Coetzee's fiction.

What Eagleton discusses as deconstructive method serves as a description for much post-modernist writing, Coetzee's included:

> Deconstruction does indeed attend to both sense and non-sense, signified and signifier, meaning and language: but it attends to them at those points of conjuncture the effect of which is a liberation from the tyranny of sense. (481)

The desired release from the "tyranny of sense" Eagleton sees as a continuation of the Frankfurt School's "rage against positivity, the suspicion of determinate meaning as such, the fear that to propose is to be complicit." Post-modernist writing, the literary counterpart of deconstructive theory, demonstrates its suspicion of determinate meaning through its rejection of realism, closure, and textual mastery. It is as a response to these issues that Coetzee writes his fiction. Although Eagleton is ready to accept the value of some deconstructive technique, he is severely critical of the fact that deconstruction replicates unselfconsciously the very politics it assumes it can avoid. "Historically speaking, many of the vauntedly novel themes of deconstruction do little more than reproduce the most commonplace types of bourgeois liberalism" (483). He goes on to list these themes, and this list catalogues many of Coetzee's failings. I will give Eagleton's list and then go on to comment in detail on how Coetzee's fiction and his own sparse remarks demonstrate his subscription to liberalism. The liberal commonplaces according to Eagleton are:

> The modest disownment of theory, method, and system; the revulsion from the dominative, totalizing and unequivocally denotative; the privileging of plurality and heterogeneity; the recurrent gesture of hesitation, indeterminacy; the devotion to gliding and process, slippage and movement; the distaste for the definitive. (483)

The disownment of theory is evident in the interview quoted above. Coetzee

states that it is fruitful to consider fiction as in search of its meaning, uncertain of what it might find, desirous of locating its intent. In his writing, his practice shows that he does not want to limit himself to one method. Characterization and plot structure vary considerably from novel to novel. Coetzee anti-systematically uses and abuses realist technique. The revulsion from the dominative and the totalizing is implied by his use of narratives, his refusal to supply either a framing narrative or an authoritative narrative voice. This gesture is praised by critics like Watson. By refusing the "unequivocally denotative," Coetzee avoids being "assimilated and reduced to a single canonical meaning" (Watson 384). In The New Statesman Harriet Gilbert identifies his desire not "to collude with our simplifying--our reduction of everything from or about South Africa to black-white duality" (28). The revulsion of the totalizing means that the lines are blurred and the reader is locked in a game of ever increasing complexity. The impossibility of ever knowing, ever transcending the ascribed mode of consciousness is moved centre-stage. Meaningful action having been prevented by the ageless ambiguity of things, the result is stasis.

Hence Coetzee's privileging of plurality, his "ambivalence of focus" (Watson 390). By problematizing history, character, motive, fictional reality, he need never indicate a position. The recurrent gestures of indeterminacy and hesitation subsist at every level of his fiction. Magda's narratives burgeon and the unified subject collapses. Who speaks in the final section of Foe? Is the Magistrate (with his own privileging of plurality) an index of Coetzee's own position or is he the object of his criticism? Whose fault is Eugene Dawn? At every level in the texts, from character to individual words, slippage is guaranteed. The Magistrate's slips and Friday's OOooo's escape meaning. In the process Coetzee's novels escape definition. Eagleton is again relevant here, "One can no longer doubt, watching the remorseless centralizing of the contingent, the dogmatic privileging of what escapes over what doesn't, the constant dissolution of dialectics, that one is in the

presence of a full-blooded ideology" (484).

To enjoy the acrobatics of Coetzee's prose, to be wooed into playing literary hide-and-seek, is to be lulled into political quietism. To stop at the fascination of the dissolution of character is to buy into deconstruction. Liberal conformism and compromise are preserved by a textual "dispersal of the subject so radical as to render it impotent as any kind of agent at all, least of all a revolutionary one. If the proletariat can be reduced to text, trace, symptom or effect, many tedious wrangles can be overcome at a stroke" (485). The earlier comments on Coetzee's effacement of economic motive are pertinent in this context. Coetzee's fictional practice, like deconstruction, "provides you with all the risks of a radical politics while cancelling the subject who might be summoned to become an agent of them" (484).

Eagleton is prepared to admit that there are ways of interrogating texts--methods we can perhaps infer from Coetzee's fiction--which have the potential to shake academic/ideological discourse to its roots. What is at question for him is the appropriation of these insights and procedures in ways "which objectively legitimate bourgeois hegemony" (486). The uses to which these insights and procedures are to be put are not indicated in Coetzee's fiction, nor explicitly stated by him in interview. Thus his texts can be appropriated by the Steiners of this world. Coetzee, whose authorial intention is supposedly irrelevant, has nothing to say about this.

Returning to Coetzee's own remarks on his reading publics, his position becomes clearer. In the light of Eagleton's comments on the appropriation of deconstructive technique, it seems that Coetzee himself has been appropriated. The critics in the United States, Coetzee tells us, read in the "general terms in which books are read by intelligent mainly academic type critics" (Penner 34). Note the privileging of the "general," the sophisticated. The critics that Coetzee actually lives among ask the dominative totalizing question of "where does this book fit in

the political struggle?" The latter are, Coetzee concedes, serious, intelligent people "but [and this but is telling] they are reading my books in a certain way" (34: emphasis mine). Coetzee cannot be naive enough to assume that academics in the United States do not also read "in a certain way." He has his own vested interests in keeping politics and novels apart. The particular ways of reading which he rejects are "influenced by Marxism and Third World thinking." My original question was what was the potential of Coetzee's work for contribution to political debate and to change in South Africa? That he is ready to dissociate himself from the people he lives among in order to gain the applause of his U.S. audience, that he feels he can afford not to engage with the major forces for change in current South African politics seems to indicate that Coetzee could not care. If this is his premise, the likelihood of his making any significant contribution is negligible.

V. Conclusion

J.M. Coetzee has been recognized as an exceptionally talented writer and has won several major prizes. In the Heart of the Country and Waiting for the Barbarians both received the premier South African literary award, the CNA prize. Life and Times of Michael K won the Booker Prize in 1983. Coetzee's publications include not only novels but also translations, linguistic studies and literary criticism. It is not surprising that, as an internationally acclaimed writer, he has frequently been given space in newspapers and magazines to air his views on South African literature and politics. Neither is it surprising that his novels should be interrogated with regard to his political position.

As Coetzee himself mentions, in South Africa the dominant attitude towards writing is that it should indicate where it belongs in "the struggle." The majority of literate South Africans regard aestheticism as a bourgeois luxury. Literature which is primarily concerned with itself as artefact, which stresses its literariness at the expense of its politics is dismissed as irrelevant. This attitude privileges those forms of cultural production which best serve as a vehicle for social comment. For novelistic practice, realism is deemed the best vehicle. These are the dominant assumptions about writing in the culture in which J.M. Coetzee produces his novels. As the texts belong in a self-conscious, metafictional, post-modernist mode, his readers find it hard to identify them as being either for or against the regime.

Coetzee's South African audience which reads expecting declarative political messages with direct reference to South Africa, often finds his novels disappointing. His international readership, however, has different sets of expectations--ones which it frequently feels are met. These readers approach his works waiting for him to impart deep and meaningful observations on man and society and man and nature. Content simply to examine his texts thematically, his international reviewers universalize the situations his novels describe and frequently naturalize his fiction as political allegory. This type of reading divests his works of their potential

subversive impact. To reduce Coetzee's novels to allegory is to justify certain power structures as metaphysical conditions. Mankind is locked in an endlessly repeated cycle of violence in which Man is either Master or Slave; "In the end there is no distinction between the torturer and the tortured" (Ableman 21); they are both sides of the same coin, a coin on which is stamped "Humanity."

This kind of understanding of his works yields very little that is new and certainly nothing that could change attitudes towards colonialism and/or neo-colonialism. When Nadine Gordimer criticizes the allegorical interpretation of Life and Times of Michael K and says, "Man becomes Everyman (that bore)" (3), she is pointing out the failure of allegory to effect a change in consciousness. Her own reading stresses the particularity of Michael K the Cape Coloured, and her desire is to move away from the universalizing impulse in order to focus on the specific historical and geographical coordinates of the novel. This kind of reading is seldom accommodated by Coetzee's novels, however, because of their spatial and temporal dislocation. Readers who want to find political material in his novels are hard pressed. Consequently many of his reviewers have been thrown back onto their metaphysical notion of the "ageless ambiguity of things" (Ableman 21)--an ambiguity which will remain as long as critics and reviewers invest it with value.

Coetzee's novels repeatedly signal that they are not a window on reality, not a slice of life or a nugget of truth. In the foregrounding of their fictionality, his texts enact the constructed nature of stories and the relativity of truth. The profusion of metafictional devices and the disruption of plot and character exemplify Coetzee's talents as an experimental writer. His manipulation of narrative in In the Heart of the Country and Dusklands provides us with useful insights into the centrality of discursive practice in the creation of identity and the exercise of power. He reveals in his fictions how the legitimations people and factions use are manifestations of certain consensual beliefs and have in fact no inherent truth.

Coetzee explores and exemplifies the arbitrary and duplicitous nature of language. His narrative techniques imply that history equals the stories that a culture chooses to tell itself, in the same way that the autonomous individual is no more than the sum of the stories it chooses to relate. The givens by which we live our lives are no more than chimerical fictions, always prone to dispersal and collapse.

This perception of reality appears to be a far cry from the complacent assumptions of Coetzee's critics and reviewers. He starts out from a position which is shared by radicals and Marxists: one of suspicion of language, of rhetoric, of truth. He diverges from them in refusing to indicate a choice about how to tackle the contingent or whether to align oneself with the regime or the enemy. A narrative theory of history or identity is an interesting intellectual conundrum but it does not explain how one might effect any change in the balance of power either in the South African context or elsewhere. The literary notion of textuality and the infinite free play of meaning, in the South African context, smacks rather of the ageless ambiguity of things. These are the notions that Coetzee plays with in his fiction: they amount to a deferral of moral choice.

Critics like Vaughan and Rich would like to have Coetzee make a more declarative statement of his position. Apologists for his ambivalence reply that "Coetzee is writing <u>fiction</u>, a type of fiction, moreover, which is not realism and which, therefore does not need to obey the latter's invariable demand that the individual event be related to the wider social and economic processes" (Watson 377). The issue here is the divisibility or indivisibility of literature and politics. Watson, like many of Coetzee's other critics and reviewers, insists on their separation. In South Africa, the dominant attitude is that writers are accountable to their society; in less turbulent countries like the States, the insistence on accountability dwindles. The attitude which most closely resembles Coetzee's own is apparent in the following extract from the interview with Wicksteed and Thorold:

> And it is perhaps a mark of all critical activity to try to swallow one

> kind of discourse with another kind of discourse. For example, in academic criticism, to swallow literature into a certain kind of academic discourse. And many of the unformed resistances--or inarticulated resistances--that people have towards the whole academic activity seem to be connected with a sense that one discourse is swallowing another, when one may not want that. And what I am now resisting is the attempt to swallow my novels into a political discourse. Because I'm not prepared to concede that the one kind of discourse is larger or more primary than the other. So that attempts to swallow up the intention that lies in or behind a book of mine--let's assume for the moment that there is an intention there--with some wider or more all-embracing, more swallowing notion of social intention--I have to resist them because, frankly, my allegiances lie with the discourse of the novels and not with the discourse of politics. (5)

Coetzee's use of the word swallowing here is very interesting. He implies that it is a negative action and says that he is resisting being swallowed by Marxists. He downplays the fact that readers make sense of writing by fitting it into some prior signifying system and they cannot help but do this. This kind of activity is necessary for the production of meaning. As Culler points out, at some point naturalization, or the bringing of texts within a discursive order, is imperative. To allow texts to remain completely open is to leave them meaningless. In this sense, "swallowing" is a crucial part of the interpretive act. As Coetzee knows, for all that swallowing is necessary and normal, it is not neutral but always ideologically loaded. Coetzee may wish to resist being swallowed by Marxists, but his novels are repeatedly swallowed by other interest groups. A concrete example of this is the whole edifice of the United States book industry represented by critics such as Cynthia Ozick and George Steiner. Coetzee's novels are understood as legitimations of liberal inactivity, of constructive engagement. He has been understood as being

against the illegal activities of those people dubbed variously "terrorists" and "freedom fighters." As his novels demonstrate, to speak is to enter into a signifying system in which power circulates endlessly. One cannot not participate, regardless of one's desire for neutrality. He knows (unless we are caught in a web of indeterminacy where neither his interviews nor his novels "mean" anything) that the only absolute way to resist being swallowed is to fall silent.

What then is he saying? and to whom is he speaking? I have argued that he acts as a diagnostician of the malady of Western culture and that he examines the interaction between man and system (language systems, political systems, philosophical systems). My objection to his articulations of this interaction is that his novels invite and receive universalizing, totalizing interpretations that ignore the specificity of reality in South Africa in the Eighties. He writes of a particular historical conjuncture and for a particular audience yet consistently suppresses that particularity. Vaughan is germane to this point:

> What has he to say to those South African racial-social groups not ascribed to the Western malady? Evidently, Coetzee is only being consistent if he has nothing to say to them. Within the terms of his own aesthetic, he can have nothing to say. Given the erosion of the liberal intelligentsia, he writes therefore to a declining, narrowing readership. His work partakes of the doom of which he writes. There is no scope for interaction with other work of different racial-social origin, proceeding within contemporary South Africa. (134)

The South African audience capable of appreciating Coetzee's novelistic techniques is a rarefied one. Coetzee requires a high level of literacy and a firm literary background. His formal disruptions and metafictional motifs involve his readers in games of ever-increasing complexity where the sovereignty of the subject and the logic of plot are fractured and challenged. These ambiguities render plot and character indeterminate and undecidable. The consequence is that Coetzee's

stance on anything, politics included, cannot be inferred from his texts. His work has been understood as both "vision to the nerve centre of being," and "literary hide and seek." The obvious conclusion is that his fictions are simply what we want them to mean. Coetzee is an internationally recognized author and scholar. He is clearly a man of great intelligence and expansive learning. He has highly developed skills as a writer of fiction. For all these reasons he is in a position to make a significant contribution to change in his country, both internally and abroad. He could, if he wished, silence attempts to subsume his works into the culture that is happy to believe that constructive engagement is a humane policy towards South Africa. However, the theoretical premises from which he writes (and I have shown that these imply also political, philosophical and moral premises), and the ambiguity of his fictions, seem deliberately chosen to allow him to remain silent on an issue where silence is reprehensible. Coetzee's insistence on his right to be silent seems to be an abuse of his talents, of his education, of his fellow countrymen and women, and ultimately of himself.

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